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LAUGHTER FROM THE LOWLANDS

Hugh Talbot has also written

GENTLEMEN—THE REGIMENT! A Novel

GAY PAGAN. A Novel

LITTLE FLOWERS OF ST. PANCRAS

LAUGHTER FROM THE LOWLANDS

*Cordially
Yours*

BY
HUGH TALBOT

60.

AB

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Very little seems to be known about the painter, Adriaen Brouwer, and this story is almost entirely fictitious.

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CHAPTER I

BIRTH OF A PAINTER

I

PIETER BROUWER staggered through the windy streets of Oudenaarde towards his cottage near the derelict fortifications. Behind him snatches of din from the Twelfth Night kermis came gustily to his large frozen ears, and he chuckled. Dark against the turbulent sky the eaves of the houses seemed about to crash down on his head; nor would he have cared much if they had, for he was superbly drunk. He watched with interest the course of his great splayed feet over the cobbles, never quite certain what they would do next. Then he came to a corner, the wind suddenly sprang out at him, he cowered inside his ragged cloak, coughed, and broke into a shambling trot.

He had had a good day. They had taken his design for a tapestry border. He had made a few stivers gambling at the kermis. There had been dancing in the afternoon, and the baker's girl had proved no less appetizing—though more expensive—than he had expected. Then fellow-tapestry-workers had been forthcoming to pay for his drink and listen greedily to the boastful details of his conquest.

And now he had to face his wife. Well, she would probably be in bed and asleep. But even in sleep Anna's worn, placid face bore that expression of confident serenity, which was a constant reproach to his manhood, and to a conscience already sufficiently

troubled by the necessity, these days, of continual change of religious convictions. Year in, year out, Spaniards tortured you into Catholicism, and stubborn Protestant Flemings shamed you by their endurance. It was enough to make a man drink.

He turned the last corner, the wind nearly knocked him over, and he began to feel rather sick. There it was, the shapeless black cottage, with—the devil!—a light showing. Anna would be patiently stitching a kerchief or a lace cap for her little shop—a *cursedly* virtuous figure looming in the light of the candle. She'd look up, take in his condition at a glance, and perhaps give one of those little sighs. She wouldn't say a word, but he'd feel a brute for having betrayed yet again his wife and the commandments of his faith. Great God! wasn't he a man? He'd show her! Ah, but would he when the time came? . . .

His cold fingers fumbled with the latch, while the wind sent his cloak billowing round his neck. He intended an impressive entrance, but the cursed door would not come open. Then it gave suddenly from within, he was jerked forward, almost tripping over the step, the candle spluttered and went out, and the door banged behind him. He stood still, swaying a little, and what he could see of the room would tilt up sideways.

A voice said quietly: 'I'll light the candle again.'

'No, no!' He found himself speaking with laboured clarity. 'Do not light the candle.'

He struggled with his cloak, but it seemed to be tied round him in knots, and he kept knocking his hat over his eyes.

'But how can I finish this coif if——'

'Come and help me off with my cloak.'

He heard slow dragging steps, felt his hat removed, and then chilly fingers at his neck.

'Ugh! You smell of drink.'

'Oh, I do, do I?'

He thrust his arms round her shoulders, imprisoning her hands—rough blocks of ice—under his chin, dragging her face against his. Then he became most satisfactorily angry. Betrayal of faith, betrayal of marriage vows—he would defy both in the person of his wife! He'd show her!

'No, Pieter, no!'—there was a faint, gratifying note of fear in her voice, but he smothered the rest of her protest under his mouth. She began to struggle, twisting her head from side to side, punching at his chin with her ice-cold fists. He laughed. For once he was gloriously unafraid. Besides, in the dark, he could almost imagine that it was the baker's girl. . . .

II

Anna Brouwer staggered over the flat, frosty grass towards the cottage. The load of firewood across her back was almost breaking her in two. She felt as if she were weighed down to earth. Every frozen rut or hoof-mark, every iron-hard mole-hill was a separate obstacle causing her to stumble. And with each stumble a white sword of fire leapt within her. She felt colder than ever before, though there was sweat on her upper lip, and the sun was brilliant in the pale, chilled sky. She was seeing everything with peculiar clarity, although obsessed with the pain in her back, which seemed to gather itself together every now and then like a great black wave, toppling over on her, crushing her, so that she had to stop to bite her wrist and sob. She

saw without realization each single rimed dagger of grass, each twig frozen into the little shining puddles of the cart-tracks, and, when she lifted her head with the pain, the dark birds and the bare branches were sharp against the sky above her home, with the trees and roofs of Oudenaarde beyond.

Please God, Pieter would be at the cottage! She could see the fowls and a pig or two wandering hungrily over the frozen mud outside it. The wheel, which Pieter was too idle to fit on to the cart, leaned against the wall, with the diminished pile of fire logs and the new axe with its smooth handle and bright blade. Wisps of blue smoke trailed up from the chimney. There were big rents in the thatch. Nearly home, praise God! Another two hundred steps. Ah, here it was again! Mounting, mounting up, high and black above her. She tried to run from it, but her knees seemed to turn to water, and she fell, while the tidal wave of agony broke over her.

Slowly she picked herself up, trembling, sweating. It had passed. But another was there, crouched behind her, gathering strength. Would she be able to get home before it overtook her? No one had warned her that the pain could be like this—and this was only the beginning. Please God, Pieter would be there when she got back! . . .

She stood by the wall of the cottage clenching the wheel in her hands, shaking it with unusual strength, one knee drawn up against the other leg, while the wave crashed and foamed about her. The young sow, dirty yellow white, came and nuzzled against her calf as if in sympathy, and the tight, raw graze on its naked flank, and the tender pink flesh inside its nostrils, were vivid experiences. ‘It’s all very well for you,’ she

whimpered. Then, as the wave ebbed, she called out again: ‘Pieter! Pieter!’ No answer came. She sobbed. She must go for the midwife herself.

The sow followed her hopefully as far as the street, then gave an annoyed snort and turned to nose optimistically in the unyielding mud. Anna found the cobbles crueller than the fields. The midwife lived near the market-place—a ten minutes’ walk at the best of times, now the path to Calvary. And she wanted to hide herself away from every one, with only the midwife. How far could she get before the pain came on again? To that next corner? It was such a lovely afternoon; everything was so clear in the bright air, and the sun was lying in golden strips across the fields, while the sky above the houses seemed the distant reflection of a fire.

Then, without warning, the white sword of flame plunged in and out, in and out at the base of her spine. . . .

III

Night had fallen when Pieter Brouwer came back from the tavern. He was surprised to find an empty room, and annoyed to see the table bare except for a candle. He threw some drawings on to it and called loudly: ‘Anna! Anna! My food!’ He had his fingers round the handle of the door of the inner room when it was pushed open, and a querulous puffy face, topped by straggling, dirty white hair, appeared at about the height of his chest.

‘Not so much noise, my good man, not so much noise!’

‘Merciful God! Is it . . .?’

A gasp came from the semi-darkness beyond. His little frightened eyes opened wider and his face went a heavy red. He tried to push past the midwife, but she put a hand on his stomach.

'Go away! You can't come in here!'

'But I ought to be with her.'

'Go away!'

He hesitated there between duty and fear. The little bedroom seemed unfamiliar. Its pungent smell was uncanny. It all reminded him somehow of hell. He took a step back, and the midwife's hand fell to her bulging, black side with a little plop.

'Pieter! Pieter!'

He tried again to force his way in.

'There, you see! She's calling! She wants me!'

'I tell you she doesn't know what she wants, poor soul. Go away and drink.'

The midwife shut the door in his face, and left him standing there, staring. He heard the key turned in the lock. Oh, devils in hell! It was no good just staring at that door. He couldn't help; and there were those drawings to copy. He sat down at the table and stared at the drawings, listening to the small ominous sounds from the inner room. Then he got up and went out. There was the wheel he had promised to do. He put a hand on it. The noise of hammering might disturb Anna; besides, it was too dark to see properly. He started walking aimlessly up and down in the cold moonlight, thinking incongruous, jumbled thoughts and trying to keep them concentrated on his wife. Then he remembered that he ought to pray. He even forgot about his food.

IV

Anna lay on her bed, chewing one end of a piece of clothing and twisting the other end in her fingers, counting and counting again the white hairs projecting

from a wart on the midwife's neck, making them add up differently each time. The white rose of fire inside her smouldered and glowed, bursting suddenly into tongues of flame which penetrated to every corner of her body. She had never thought that such torture was possible, even at the hands of the Spaniards. But why were they doing it to her? They had besieged and taken Oudenaarde years ago—besides, she was a good Catholic, and so was Pieter now. Perhaps they had heard of his various recantations? Perhaps she was guilty because she had not betrayed his past to them? 'Pieter! Pieter! don't let them do it to me!' Ah, you're never much help. Why won't they hurry and let me die? That great white rose—the Rose of Sharon, the great Rose of Purgatory! And there are angels, with hair of flame and wings of blinding azure! And one has a ram's nose; and that sow's face is familiar, with the tender skin inside its nostrils; and on the purple neck of another is a wart sprouting silver hairs—one, two, three, four. . . . Now they're all misty again. I must count them right, and when I do they'll stop torturing me and I'll be dead. . . .

The white rose was a piercing lily now, straight and taut. She was the Blessed Virgin, and her child was the lily of the Lord. She was the earth, and the lily of her loins was pushing its way upwards to the sun. She had watered it with her love and her blood, and now the lily was pushing up strong and taut to the sun through the tunnel of her body. She was the blessed earth, from which springs life with a steady, implacable rhythm. Ah, but there was unutterable satisfaction in this agonizing rhythm of the earth. . . . Unutterable satisfaction . . . unutterable agony. . . . Then fire leapt down from the sun to greet the lily, and they

were as one. And suddenly her child was a separate warm identity, ruthless, independent, adorably trying to kick her out of the way. . . .

V

The midwife came out into the moonlight and peered about her, like a tattered old black bird. Pieter jumped up at once.

‘Tell me!’

‘You have a son. It’s a fine little creature.’

‘Oh, thank God! Thank God!’

He crossed himself vigorously and sank on to his knees in the frozen mud. The midwife gazed down at him.

‘Your wife’s as well as might be expected,’ she went on impassively, ‘though it’s not been easy. Love of God, I’m stiff! She’ll not be able to bear any more children, I should say.’ Pieter’s lips ceased moving, and he opened one little eye on her. ‘You can go in and see her for a moment presently. I have a few more things to do in there, then I’ll get you both a bit o’ supper. Your wife needs it.’

She turned and went in. The young sow came and nuzzled hopefully against Pieter’s praying form.

Pieter tiptoed slowly into the torture chamber, as he thought of it, feeling somehow guilty, as after one of his changes of faith. There was still the uncanny light and the pungent smell. He tiptoed over to the bed, and looked down at Anna and the tiny, boiled, hag-like creature at her side. Its mouth drooped, and it suddenly uttered a series of peevish little animal cries. He started.

‘Is it ill?’ he whispered.

A faint smile trembled for a second on Anna's lips. Her face was paler, more worn, but its expression was as unconquerable as ever. God above! Could not even this ordeal conquer her? He hated her invincibility. She was smiling again. Was the smile patronizing or appealing? He said: 'Well—er,' hesitated for a few moments, and then tiptoed out. Anna began to weep silently, weakly.

He sat down at the table and gazed at his drawings. There was a heartening everyday smell of onions coming from somewhere. He looked up. The midwife on her knees—a monstrous black beetle—was blowing at the sad fire under the stew-pot. . . . His son should not eat scraps of meat and onion out of a stew-pot. He should not try his eyes over stupid classical cartoons in the ill-lit tapestry rooms. He should be a prosperous portrait-painter, and grow up to bless his old father. And he should be called Adriaen.

A murmuring from the direction of the fire checked the flow of his thoughts.

'What did you say?' he asked.

'I said that I charge three crowns.'

'You charge three crowns? What the devil for?'

'For your son.'

'Three crowns is ridiculous!'

'Yes, indeed!—it would be four and a half if your wife wasn't an old friend.'

'I refuse to pay such a sum.'

'Then I shall have to appeal to the magistrates.'

'But, my good woman——'

'Well, I can't stay arguing. Your wife wants some stew.'

CHAPTER II

PORTRAIT OF A YOUTHFUL ECCLESIASTIC

I

THE afternoon sun poured down into the market-place, and a multiplicity of smells rose up to meet it—smells of cattle and sweating horses, pigs, dust, over-ripe fruit and vegetables; smells of refuse, garbage, and hot human beings—which hung about in the stifling air. It was market-day; the square was swarming with people drifting aimlessly in cross-currents, and the noises were as discordant as the smells. Women, for once at rest, sat by their upper windows vacantly staring at the crowd, or, if they had any pretensions to youth, their eyes darted hopefully around. The hôtel-de-ville seemed elegantly asleep as usual, with pigeons sunning themselves on its roof and pinnacles. Some boys from the tops of trees were pelting passers-by with rotten fruit and muck picked up off the cobbles. The day's trading was mostly over, but it was too hot to go indoors, and this leisurely wandering and gossiping and staring was the main weekly amusement of the town. It was pleasant, too, standing in the sharp, pointed shadows of the houses, or under the plane trees. Pleasant to be hot for a change, but not unbearably so; towards sunset it would be cooler, and perhaps there would be rain to lay this choking dust. But, above all, it was pleasant to be safe in a crowd all doing and thinking exactly the same, without fear of enduring pain for those thoughts.

Anna Brouwer sat at her little linen stall. There were grey hairs and vertical furrows on her upper lip. Her hair had grown a little whiter, her face a little puffier and more worn during the fifteen years since the birth of her son. She was as placid as ever, and seemed born to sit and look on contentedly, but with the unconscious air of superiority, which still maddened her husband and earned her the respect of her few customers.

She felt a jog at her elbow, looked up, and saw one of those ramshackle soldiers, who had been the laughing-stock of the town since the Spaniards went, standing over her with a long pike in his hand.

'Now, mistress, you must move that stall of yours back.'

She smiled.

'Why must I? It's comfortable here.'

'There's the procession of clergy coming through with the new priest on their way to St. Walburga's. Come, now. I'll give you a hand.'

All across the square, stalls, animals, carts, and barrows, men, women, and children were being pushed back to leave an open space on the way to the bridge over the Scheldt. No one objected, for they were only forced further back into the shade. Besides, they were used to being herded about, and they enjoyed any form of pageantry now that it was no longer associated with death and torture. But before they had been pushed into position there was a movement at the far end of the market-place, and they all swayed forward again to get a better view, carrying the soldiers with them.

Anna, finding herself in the front, sat hot but amused. Round the corner she saw the head of the procession slowly advancing. A small boy with a mass of fair

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hair and a face scrubbed and shining—pretty enough to cause the women to nudge each other and murmur a long-drawn ‘Ow!’—swung a heavy censer with obviously tired arms, and the incense obliterated for a moment the host of other smells. Anna noticed that the child’s white cassock was crumpled and unwashed. Then she heard a hoarse chanting. Twelve artisans in pairs, with twelve different expressions of boredom, disguised in white and faded scarlet, were bawling through their noses, their time varying as radically as their step, their Latin meaning as little to them as it did to their listeners, who began crossing themselves. After a decent interval shuffled the scraggy little bishop, a wisp of grey hair from underneath his mitre sticking out over his sweaty forehead, his eyes bent humbly, but cautiously, upon the filthy ground in front, the tips of his thin fingers touching prayerfully, one nail continually twitching at the skin round the corresponding nail of the other hand. Every one sank to their knees, and the bishop extended a bony hand in blessing. Beside the bishop strode a priest, with great difficulty restraining his pace to suit the episcopal shuffle, and bearing the crozier with every appearance of mystic pride and ecclesiastical snobbery. The new priest, a few yards behind, clearly disliked being in the centre of the picture. His bulging eyes goggled from side to side under his biretta. He had a smirk of self-conscious benefaction on his mouth, at one corner of which was a little streak of white saliva. Sweat poured down his cheeks. A finger scratched unhappily at his thigh. At the end of the little procession four acolytes, obviously impatient with their slow progress, were almost treading on his heels.

They crossed the market-place, and the subdued

muttering of the crowd swelled again to loudness as the four acolytes disappeared over the bridge. People were beginning to straggle out between the lines of soldiers, when a raucous din of voices, some piercing treble, some squeaky and newly broken, shouting the coarsest verse of a favourite tavern song, caused them to stop and turn their heads. Round the corner came a ragged guttersnipe with a turned-up nose, smiling cheekily, swinging a cooking-pot, from which issued foul-smelling smoke, at the end of a rope. Next, twelve older boys in strips of sacking with the word 'Cherubim' painted roughly across their backs, their faces staring up at the heavens, their hands clasped as if they were praying, marched slowly forward yelling out their song. Anna could not help laughing to herself, though she could hear gasps of horror all round her. After the 'Cherubim' a rusty old scythe was carried in pomp before the mock 'bishop,' who shuffled along in excellent mimicry, wearing an inverted milk-can precariously balanced on his head, and nothing else at all, except for a strip of faded tapestry round his loins, a nose painted bright red, and traces of a recent beating across his shoulders. With one hand he gave his blessing to the people, and in the other he carried a large copper jug from which both he and his crozier-bearer drank frequently. At the end of a long string tied to his waist followed a small, pink sucking-pig, with an old biretta attached to its head and a scarlet bow round its little curling tail. Behind this, four youths, also in strips of sacking, but with the word 'Seraphim' scrawled on their backs, shrieked another bawdy song and held their hands up to the skies.

The shocked silence of the crowd did not last long.

There were furious shouts, and some tried to push through to get at these blasphemers. The soldiers, having no leader present, looked at each other completely at a loss, though one of them did make a rush at the ‘bishop,’ only to receive an end of the crozier in his stomach. But Anna did not know where to look. In the person of the ‘bishop’ she had recognized her son.

The astonishment which they caused allowed this second procession to reach the middle of the square unmolested, when a particularly squelchy pear was thrown from a tree-top, to land with perfect accuracy on the bridge of the ‘bishop’s’ nose, and disintegrate all over his face. He stopped, spluttered, swore, snapped the pig’s string, whistled two notes three times, and then plunged into the crowd. This whistle was evidently a signal, for in a few seconds the procession had disappeared, leaving their vestments, insignia, and the small pink pig, snuffling anxiously, in the middle of the road. The soldiers disappeared after them, at length persuaded to action by public opinion. And an old peasant with an eye to the main chance made off down a narrow alley with the small pink pig struggling under his cloak.

Anna Brouwer, with trembling hands, began to pack up her wares. Adriaen would be getting himself into very serious trouble soon. A few years ago such a performance would have meant general slaughter. She was never certain what mischief he and his band—the ‘Urchins,’ as they called themselves—would be making. Oh, Adriaen, why must you do these mad things? But Anna could not help smiling to herself, even though her eyes had started to fill with tears.

II

Meanwhile Adriaen was burrowing his naked way between gaping people in pursuit of the pear-thrower. The very tightness with which they were packed together proved lucky, for he had wormed past them and was hidden in the press before they had realized who it was.

Arrived beneath the tree which he had marked down, he peered up and saw a grinning face. He shook his fist, gave a leap, caught hold of a branch, and swung himself up. But as soon as he had gripped the main trunk, he saw his assailant drop lightly to the ground, stick out his tongue, and run off. Adriaen looked down again, and was amused to see just below him a mass of faces, like clustered sheep—all gaping upwards with the utmost seriousness. He laughed. He called out ‘Baaa!’ He wished he had some pebbles to drop into those open, ridiculous mouths. He went on laughing. Here, in the market-place of Oudenaarde, was an almost stark-naked boy up a tree, with the population staring at him, and apparently prepared to go on staring. He roared with laughter, almost shaking himself off the branch. But a loud voice interrupted him:

‘Come down!’

Adriaen saw a soldier with a little waggly beard and hands cupped round his mouth. The faces below all looked down and round towards the soldier.

‘No; you come up,’ Adriaen suggested.

The faces swayed round to stare up at him again.

‘Come down at once!’

Faces down and round.

‘There’s no room for any one else where you are.’

Faces round and up.

'Then I 'll have to come and fetch you.'

'Come, then!'

And the soldier started pushing his way towards the tree. It was an unpleasant position—the soldier had a pike, and he was red in the face with anger. As he came nearer Adriaen could see the little shining beads of sweat on his cheeks under his wide hat. Well, they 'd caught him this time. He wondered what they would do—the 'Urchins' had a bad name already.

Suddenly a voice shouted: 'Jump!' Without thinking, Adriaen swung one leg over the branch and launched himself off. He landed on the soldier's chest, narrowly missing the pike, they crashed to the ground together, and the soldier turned a somersault. There was a roar of laughter. Adriaen extricated himself from pike, sword handle, and leather jacket, got to his feet, shaken but active, and dived through the crowd. The soldier got up more slowly, dazed and furious at the laughter.

'Which way did he go ?'

Fingers pointed and he lumbered off, throwing people aside. Gaping faces stared after him.

Adriaen very soon realized that he had bruised one heel and hurt the other leg in his fall. He was tall for his age, and he could run faster than any of his 'Urchins,' but now he was forced to limp, which was difficult on the cobbles of this alley-way. It was stiflingly hot, too, the sun had disappeared, and the sky was dull and threatening. He was glad he was almost naked. As he turned a corner he looked back to see the soldier pounding after him, trailing his pike with a clatter over the cobbles; and after the soldier pounded, apparently, most of the population of Oudenaarde. He laughed again, until he trod by mistake on his heel. He wondered whether it would save trouble to give himself up. The

result would be exceedingly painful, but in any case the soldier must very soon catch him.

He examined the walls on either side. They seemed to be lower towards the end of the street. He heard a clattering behind him and a shout of: 'Stop, you young devil!' He turned. The soldier was much nearer. He grasped the handle of a door in the wall and pushed. It opened. He was in a little paved courtyard at the back of a house, with scarlet flowers in fat brown tubs, and a maid-servant washing linen on a wooden scrubbing-board. The girl gave a loud shriek and flung a wet cloth over her head. He waved and limped on. The door of the house was open, showing a corridor running through to the street outside. He hobbled along the corridor, catching glimpses of well-furnished rooms. A woman, alarmed by the shriek, bustled out into the corridor as he passed, shrieked in her turn, and fled back into her room. Adriaen smiled. Then, as he was coming out into the street in front, an old man in a long black gown entered the house, blocking his way. Fifteen devils! He put down his head and charged. But the man had stepped aside; he ran into nothing and stumbled and fell, hurting his knees badly.

As he scrambled up he felt a hand on his tapestry loin-cloth. Fortunately it came off. Glory to God! There was the river ten yards in front. He took a run and jumped in as far as he could. It was icy-cold, and he thought he was never coming up. He opened his eyes, saw nothing but bright green wavy lines, and kicked frantically. At last he reached the surface and looked back. There on the edge stood the old man with the bit of tapestry hanging from his hand, the soldier still trailing the pike behind him and wiping

his forehead with his hat, the two women, and a proportion of the population of Oudenaarde. He heard a distant growl of thunder, and one or two large drops began to spatter on the cobbles. He waved his hand and struck out for the opposite bank. His knees were hurting, though the water cooled them. Something whizzed past his head and plopped into the river in front. So they were throwing things! He turned over to swim on his back. He saw the soldier stoop to pick up a stone, take aim and throw. It hit a dead cat floating by. Adriaen laughed, and waved. Then he turned over again and swam on, enjoying the water and watching the river leap up to meet the rain. When he heaved himself out and sat on the opposite bank the soldier had gone and the crowd was melting away. Fifteen devils! It was cold. He would find one of the 'Urchins,' borrow some clothes, and have some food. He was suddenly ravenously hungry. He got up and limped off. There was lightning now beyond the roofs of the town, and the rain was falling in straight lines. He laughed. All those stupid faces looking up at him like so many sheep! Perhaps that's what God felt like when He looked down from on high. How He must laugh—no wonder He was a good God!

III

Adriaen drank up his bowl of hot water, in which two carrots and an onion kept bobbing against his upper lip, with every appearance, audible and visible, of appreciation. His mother watched him, marvelling that he did not complain, as most boys would have done, at this wretched supper, and sighing because things had lately gone from bad to worse. Her husband's wage

was the same, but little of it reached her, and she could do no better for her son.

The rain had passed, leaving behind a soft freshness. The last of the sunlight sloping across the fields lay warmly on the tree-trunks outside, and the upper sky was a pale green. And Pieter Brouwer took up his tale once more, his mouth crammed with bread, his thick overhanging moustache still dripping soup, his swollen cheek, which nearly bunged up one eye, more fiery than ever, his other little eye flitting from son to wife and wife to son, observing one while he addressed his remarks to the other.

'Mother of God!' he was saying in the pontifical tones which he kept for the occasions when he did not feel at his ease; 'in the days of my boyhood you would never have dared to do such a wicked, wicked thing as you did this afternoon. Do you know what would have happened to you before the Truce of 1609?' He leaned towards his son, looking at his wife.

Adriaen scooped out a carrot with his fingers, pushed it whole into his mouth and said: 'Yes.'

'You would have been burned! Your mother would have been burned! I should have been burned!' He leaned back. 'And we should have been lucky if we did not have our nails and teeth drawn out as well, while we were stretched upon the rack. I tell you I've seen men and women writhing and shrieking as . . .'

Anna directed her mind elsewhere, as she usually did when Pieter began his Spanish persecution stories. Although they were true enough in the abstract, they were not founded on personal experience, and they always made her feel sick. She watched her son instead. She wished he did not always look so pale,

even though he was splendidly strong. His young body, sprawling over the top of the table—for he had only succeeded in borrowing a filthy old pair of breeches—was hard and smooth and well muscled. But his cheeks—they were always dirty and colourless. Why did he never take any trouble over his appearance? His father, now, was usually neat, even if necessarily shabby. Yet, persuade as she might, Adriaen always looked a beggar. Oh, but she adored him! Especially his rare moments of repose, when he sat, as now, his face in his hands, gazing at nothing, his mind far away, his dark eyes reserved and secret and unapproachable, his wide mouth firmly set but ready to leap into a grin, a tousled mass of black hair springing up all round his head. He might do anything, for all she cared, and it would be stupidly, weakly right for her. How had that mean-spirited creature, his father, ever managed to beget this son? But Pieter's little eye was upon her. He had realized that she was not listening. With an effort she brought her mind back. As soon as she looked at him he looked away.

' . . . We were eating the very dogs off the street,' he was saying. Anna noticed that he seemed more than usually excited over the siege story, perhaps because he was not sure of its reception. 'It could not be many hours before the town would be forced to surrender. Nobody knew what would happen when it fell into the hands of the Catholics. Should we all be massacred or put to the torture? Terrible days, terrible days! We young men had a hard time, I can tell you, keeping watch and fighting with nothing in our bellies. But the Spaniards offered terms and for once they kept them. Their commander's grandmother or somebody was born in the place, so they

kindly forbore to massacre us for a few thousand crowns. We all had to pay what we could. Terrible days, those! Any more of that soup, Anna?

'What? . . . oh, the soup. Yes; I'll just look and see.'

She rose slowly, peered into the stew-pot, took it from the fire, and poured what was left into Pieter's bowl. Then she sat down again.

Adriaen looked away from the window and turned to his father, with serious face and mocking eyes:

'I always forget whether you were Calvinist or Catholic at the end of the siege, father?' he asked.

Anna bit her lip to suppress her smile. Pieter's swollen fiery cheek seemed about to burst with a bang. His one visible eye glittered. He sucked noisily at the ends of his moustache, and threw some more bread into his mouth, which shut with an angry snap.

'My religion is my affair!' he shouted. 'And it's a great pity *you* do not seek the consolations of religion more often. I'm sure I've given you enough religious instruction.'

'Yes; but it changes so often that I get muddled.'

Anna had to pretend a sneeze.

'How dare you sneer at my conscience! That decides me. I've been wondering whether to beat you before the town authorities punish you. I shall do so—as a good Catholic it is my clear duty.'

'Oh, Pieter, will they punish him?' Anna put out a hand towards Adriaen. He took it in his with a squeeze.

'Of course! And well he deserves it. Running such a ghastly risk as to make fun of religion—and with every one looking on, too! Did you think of my reputation, son? Already people all over the town will be laughing at me. I may be dismissed from—'

'But it was only a boy's joke, Pieter.'

'Joke! Joke! To make fun of religion! Why, if it were not for the Truce he would have been tortured and burned, and so would we. Our home would have been burned, and—'

'Would they have tortured the pigs, too, father?'

'And now he dares to laugh at me! I shall certainly beat him!'

'But, Pieter, if the town authorities will punish—'

'Hold your tongue, woman!'

Adriaen squeezed her hand again.

'Bless you, mother. But please don't distress yourself—if he is determined, let him beat me.'

Pieter stood up angrily and looked from son to wife, his eye flashing. Curse it, if the boy hadn't inherited his mother's maddening sureness and inviolability! They were both quietly making a fool of him, even now when he had a reasonable enough grievance. He might belabour Adriaen until they were both exhausted, and the only person he would really hurt would be Anna. Plague take them both!

'Well, Adriaen . . . ?' He glared irresolutely at his son.

'Well, father?'

Adriaen smiled up at him. It was difficult to resist Adriaen's smile. His mouth spread across his face, his nose wrinkled a little, and his eyes glowed at you. His face ceased to be adult and became mischievously guttersnipe. So Anna thought, but apparently her husband was not prepared to be charmed.

'Well?' said Pieter again.

'Really, Pieter,' Anna burst out, 'do you expect the child to go out and bring in a bundle of sticks for you to choose from?'

Her husband glared furiously at her and began coughing. He could think of nothing to say or do beyond violently assaulting them both. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Adriaen laughing quietly. Fortunately this infuriating situation was ended by a low whistle from outside of two notes repeated three times. Adriaen jumped up at once and ran out. His parents were left looking at each other.

The twilight was deepening over the roofs and the trees smelt deliciously as Anna leaned out of the window. Adriaen's back was turned to her, and he was talking with a child about half his size. She could hear the murmur of their voices, and she smiled affectionately at their earnestness. As far as she could make out his companion was the boy who had led the procession, and her smile grew broader at the recollection. He was always doing something mad, this son of hers, and she loved him for it. But why was he? Presumably it was somehow the will of the good God. Though how Adriaen fitted in with the Divine Purpose she could not imagine. Ah, what would become of him? What? Yet she had no fears for him—she knew instinctively that there was a curious rightness about his wrongness.

Presently Adriaen came running in. His eyes were big, excited, and his mouth snapped-to pitilessly.

'Mother, they 've got hold of Sas, the little half-wit. Caught him when the procession broke up. I don't know what 'll happen to him. But I 'm going now with Johan to see what I can do.'

'Oh, don't go, Adriaen! They might take you as well.'

'They would have done that already if they were going to. And I don't think I mind much if they do.'

'To please me, Adriaen. I know it's no good forbidding you.'

He stamped his foot.

'Mother, is that fair?'

He rushed out, and she watched the two boys down the darkening street. She sighed. He was perfectly right. She had been unfair. She turned away from the window. Pieter had disappeared. How like him! She started to wash up the supper things, murmuring a prayer for her son.

IV

Adriaen came in quietly. His parents started, seeing him suddenly there.

'Adriaen!' Anna exclaimed.

He sat down on the floor and leant his back against the wall.

'The lousy swine! They flogged poor little Sas unconscious. He was lying there all bloody when we arrived. An example to all of us, they said. They wouldn't take me. Said I'd had my punishment in Sas. Just a poor little snivelling idiot—the only one they could capture and punish! God in heaven! it makes me sick, the cruelty of a lot of righteous old fools! You and your Spaniards!—the Flemings are just as bad! Poor little Sas! Father, you wanted to beat me—well, you can. Here I am.' He stood up.

'Well—er——' Pieter hesitated. 'You have certainly deserved it.'

'Yes, and now I wish it. Come!'

'Adriaen,' Anna interrupted, 'don't be so absurd! You're behaving like a very small child.'

'On the contrary, wife, he is behaving nobly. I

approve his conduct. In fact, I shall reconsider his punishment.'

Adriaen laughed. 'Perhaps mother is right. Anyhow, it doesn't matter.'

'In that case, I shall certainly beat you.'

They waited.

'I think the wisest thing we can all do,' said Anna suddenly, 'is to go to bed.'

'Now I'm sure she's right,' Adriaen said.

'God's love! I'm going to the tavern!' shouted his father, and stamped out of the room, coughing.

CHAPTER III

PORTRAIT OF AN INCIPIENT DRUNKARD

I

ADRIAEN lowered his head and stepped down into his mother's little shop.

'Well, mother, I'm tired of doing tapestry drawings, so I've come to see you.'

Anna looked up from her stitching.

'Oh! What did your father say?'

'He wasn't there when I left. Mother, you ought to pretend to be pleased to see your son. I've deserted my work especially to come and see you, and I shall certainly be in trouble in consequence!'

He kissed her cheek and sat himself down on a rough table—the only piece of furniture, except for the stool on which his mother was sitting, and the black wooden chest with the shining brass lock, which contained her stock-in-trade. The walls and ceiling appeared to be of hardened earth, though the side facing the street was mostly window and door, above which was a large crucifix. It was all very clean and light and pleasant. If his mother were rich, Adriaen thought, she would have fine rooms and lovely clothes, though they would not set off her serenity so well as this barenness, and her patched grey dress and white wimple.

'Look up at me, mother.' Anna obeyed with a lifting of her eyebrows and a slight smile. 'You would do anything I told you, wouldn't you?'

'You are a very wicked child.'

'Perhaps. But we're talking about you. Your eyes are bloodshot and their rims are scarlet. Don't they feel tired?'

'Sometimes.'

'Then why in the name of Satan do you keep on doing this work? You have one customer in a week, who probably does not buy anything. Father does not drink quite all his wages, and I only want a little food occasionally. We shall never be prosperous however hard you work. So why don't you give it up?'

'What should I do if I hadn't my shop? I hate our hovel. This is my real home, now you're nearly grown up—somewhere where I can be by myself, with my own thoughts, in peace and cleanliness.'

'And what do you think about—in peace and cleanliness?'

'Well, I wonder what form of devilment my son is up to. . . .'

'Oh, I've been very quiet lately. But, mother, I'm tired of drawing Hercules in Roman armour, sticking out his belly to look heroic, or Andromeda, all fulsome and bashful, with one breast half shown to tickle the fancy of old men like—like father.'

'Adriaen, I keep telling you you're not to say such things about your father!'

'I know, mother, I know—but that doesn't prevent them from being true. But I'll go on trying not to. And another thing—I draw well, and the other draughtsmen praise my efforts, and, although father is flattered because he taught me, he's rather jealous and afraid that one day I'll be better than him. But you know I'm fond of him—the difference between himself and his idea of himself is so comic, and I love people who make me laugh.'

'Do I make you laugh, Adriaen ?'

He jumped off the table, kissed the top of her head rather absent-mindedly, and plumped himself down on the door-step, fists in his cheeks, in thought.

'And who were Hercules and Andromeda ?' he asked suddenly.

'Mother of God! how should I know? Does it matter ?'

Adriaen laughed.

'Not in the least, but I want to know, that's all'.

'You had better ask your father.'

Adriaen jumped up, sucked at the overhanging ends of an imaginary moustache, closed one eye and puffed out a cheek for a moment, and began in his father's most pontifical voice:

'Hercules, my son, fought for us in those terrible old days. . . .'

His mother tried to look angry but could not help laughing.

'Silence, woman!' Adriaen went on. 'If only you would be more religious, wife, you——' Just then he felt something prod him in the back. He jumped round. A small old woman stood there, ugly, cheerful, and bony, draped in whitish sacking. Adriaen stepped back into the shop with a low bow.

'Andromeda to see you, mother.'

Quite a merry little cackle issued from the old woman's sunken mouth.

'A wicked lad, that of yours. We know him!' She shook her head in delighted reproof.

'Come you in, Mother Bannincx, and sit down.'

Anna got up and the old woman hobbled over to take her place on the stool. Adriaen retired behind the table, and after much searching produced a stump of

charcoal out of his pocket. His mother took a key from a nail on the wall and unlocked the chest, from which she drew carefully-folded white objects and laid them on the old woman's lap. Mother Bannincx handled them with gentle reverence, and the two women talked low and earnestly. Adriaen was forgotten.

After some time Mother Bannincx rose to go.

'I hear some players are coming shortly,' she remarked.

Adriaen pricked up his ears.

'They are to stay for a week, perhaps, and give performances at one of the taverns.'

'It 's some time now since we had players here.'

'Yes. I wasn't able to see them, and I shan't have the money to see these. And I do dearly love the players. Well, good day, Anna. Good day, young rascal'—and she hobbled out.

'Who 's the old witch, mother?' Adriaen asked.

'She 's no witch. She used to be a very wealthy, gay, and lovely woman. Her husband was killed in the siege, and they took all her money to help buy off the Spaniards, and then tortured her because they thought she had more hidden away. She comes in here sometimes. She can't afford to buy anything, but she enjoys a chat and looking at my wares.'

'Would she have any books, do you suppose?'

'Books? Why books?'

'I 'd like to know something about Hercules and these people I have to draw. Besides, I like reading.'

'She might have some. Or perhaps she could tell you who has. Run after her and see.'

'I will. Good-bye, mother. Pray don't overtire yourself with all this rush of customers.'

He kissed her cheek and ran out. She went to the door and watched him. He was going to be a fine tall man, and he would end up—anywhere! He seemed so careless of the things people treasured most, like comfort and safety. She turned back indoors and something on the table caught her eye. On its surface a caricature, quite recognizable as Mother Bannincx, was roughed out with a few strong lines. Underneath was scrawled: ‘Andromeda. By AB.’ Anna laughed and picked up the bottom of her skirt to rub it out.

II

It was a warm spring afternoon, so Adriaen started off across the plain, which stretched away in front of him so flat and green that the sky, with its frivolous blobs of cloud, was far more interesting than the land. He had just fled from his father, who had discovered him reading about mythological characters instead of drawing them. This was doubly annoying as he liked sitting in the big, cold, tapestry room, with its stone floor, its strings of warp suspended from heavy rollers, at which sat the workers painstakingly adding their daily inch or two of coloured weft to the design. He liked the bobbins, and the bright, fruit-like balls of wool hanging above, and the glowing oblongs of already compressed tapestry. He enjoyed watching the quick fingers of the workers, their huddled alert positions, and the play of the cold light on their stupid features. It would be pleasant to work there if only father would give him something worth working at, though it was more interesting now that he had read about those stimulating Greeks—the Romans seemed but the dull forerunners of Spanish tyranny.

Why were there no Pans and nymphs and fauns now to career across this flat Flanders land? It must have been an exciting life in those old days, full of rioting, roaring colour. The sun shone perpetually then, and men and animals went about in procession singing hymns of joy, not chanting hymns of sorrow out of tune. The nearest approach to Pan to-day was the portly burgher with his black gown and starched ruff, his purple face and black beard. Instead of satyrs there were slouching peasants in rags, with shapeless hats crammed down over faces like hogs or goats, and old Mother Bannincx represented the nymphs! Religion must have been a lovely thing then. And now—look at father! And look at this curious spirit of love, which encouraged one sect to torture another into agreement with it! ‘Consolations of religion’ were somewhat one-sided. Well, they probably always had been and always would be. A little of the Pan spirit in religion might revive some of the neglected Christian virtues, and bring light and happiness to down-trodden Flemish lives and flat colourless Flanders land. The land needed sun poured into it, as the people wine, though there must be even more drunkenness than in ancient Greece—and as for love-making! But all the pleasures now were so sad, and—and beast-like. Perhaps life was just as ugly then, and its beauty only existed in the minds of writers and artists. But that did not seem to matter. There was the idea—it was a lovely, happy idea—and it was the idea for him. Yes, he would show that there were still those who could live joyfully and full-bloodedly. He would not paint tortured Christs and pallid virgins: and certainly no more pompous Hercules nor fulsome Andromedas. He wanted to paint what he saw, not what other people had once imagined. Why couldn’t

father let him do what he wanted? Why all this practice? Let him practise on things he enjoyed doing—like caricaturing father. He knew he was going to be good. Father was just jealous. So, therefore, father would be pleased, really, if he went away—there would be no more competition from his son. Because, of course, that was what it meant—going away—at any rate to a new teacher. Why should his talent be wasted? But father would naturally be furious if he went to a new teacher in the town. Antwerp was the place to learn, so they all said. Well, then, he had to get to Antwerp somehow. But what about mother? He would have to leave her, and she would mind. Father would only pretend to; but it would be tearing something out by the roots for her. Mother, father, or self, one must be sacrificed. Mother of God, what a decision! . . . And meanwhile he was devilish hungry. He could not remember eating anything since early morning.

He stopped. Over to his right lay the silver coil of the Scheldt. Behind him, the walls, roofs, chimneys, and trees of Oudenaarde made a compact, yet hazy design. There seemed to be no sign of habitation near by. He must go back to the town at once. A cursed nuisance, this food! He plucked up one of the tall grasses and chewed its stalk. It tasted sweet. He would chew these and think of something else. The sun was noticeably lower in the sky. It was later than he thought. A round of squelchy yellow cheese would do well now, with a salted herring or two, and perhaps some apples to finish up with. Well, even the usual damp, bitter bread with an onion would be tasty. He snatched up a handful of the sweet grass, thrust two or three bits into his

mouth, and fixed his eyes on distant Oudenaarde, trying to decide on suitable washes for a sketch of its soft shapes.

III

Adriaen came into the town at the opposite end to his home by Notre Dame de St. Pamele. The narrow, untidy streets were full of people clattering home from work, or leaning against a wall, gossiping. Although it was not yet dark, a slip of moon hung in the sky above the spire of Notre Dame. His hunger had now become an entity in itself—almost separate from him—a long, thin, yellowish creature, with pointed ears and a piercingly shrill voice. The keen evening air combined with succulent smells of cooking from the houses made him feel faint. A rancid cabbage looked up at him from the gutter. He pulled the heart out of it, flicked away a slug, and began to chew. It was not appetizing. He spat it out. Then he found himself underneath the sign of the ‘Red Cock.’ He had to go right across the town, and the hunger was pinching his stomach with long, yellow fingers. The only thing was that he hadn’t any money to pay for food. His pockets were empty except for a few stumps of charcoal. Well, doubtless something would happen. He followed a man in.

The air of the long, low room was thick with tobacco smoke, which hung about, in spite of windows opened over a courtyard, making Adriaen cough. There were tables and benches all round, at which sat a sprinkling of peasants drinking from earthenware jugs, or puffing at clay pipes, or asleep with their heads on the table. In one corner some artisans were standing over a

tric-trac board. Men and women shouted and quarrelled at cards. The innkeeper, a worried-looking little rat of a man, and his red-faced, wrinkled wife ran round and round, buffeted with shouted orders. Two cats and a dog were asleep in different corners of the room, and fowls were pecking about the floor, fluttering away with a squawking and a flurry of wings as someone threw the dregs of a jug at them. Adriaen would have enjoyed it all if his hunger had not been crying out so shrilly.

The innkeeper's wife, who had a sharp eye for her customers, noticed him and waddled up suspiciously.

'What d' you want here ?'

'Food.'

'Where 's your money ?'

Adriaen shrugged his shoulders.

'Then go—quick! I 've had enough of your sort round here lately. This is a decent house.'

'I 'll draw your picture.'

She laughed.

'Go on out before my husband takes a broom handle to you.'

'I 'll sweep the floor, or sing you a song.'

She picked up a bit of stick and waddled at him. He easily dodged her and went on up the room past the tric-trac players, the woman after him. Then he suddenly stopped dead. The woman's stick descended upon his shoulders, but he did not notice it. She took him by the arm, shook him, swore at him, and hit him again. He did not even look round. He had just seen his father sitting in a corner on a bench, with one arm round a girl's waist, the other hand clutching a glass of wine, which he was trying to force her to swallow, as, apparently, a possible alternative to kissing him.

Neither course seemed to appeal to her. Her face, turned away from him, was pale, blotchy, and expressionless, except for a slight twitching of the nostrils. Her shapeless body lolled passively on the bench. Pieter, who had not seen his son, leant over her with swollen purple cheek, sweating skin, little glistening eye, and drops of moisture on the ends of his moustache.

The situation struck Adriaen as irresistibly funny. And to be seduced by that! His opinion of his father, both as a man and as an artist, fell even lower. And was this his substitute for Adriaen's mother? As her placid and comparatively noble features came into his mind, he felt himself boil up suddenly with anger, and he turned and snatched the stick out of the hand of the innkeeper's wife, who was still shaking him and swearing. Then he dropped it again, and the woman picked it up. They always treated women like this, he thought, even though they were someone's mother, or might become someone's mother. Meanwhile his father—great triumph—had forced the cup to his girl's lips, and she was sipping it mincingly, with no evidence of enjoyment whatever, except for the fact that she did not stop sipping, while he was exploring the little roughnesses of her cheek with the tip of his tongue, his one visible eye keeping a careful note of the amount she was drinking. Mother of God, how funny! Adriaen suddenly laughed.

Pieter Brouwer looked up and started, spilling some wine over the girl's dress. The girl swallowed her mouthful the wrong way, and coughed and spluttered over his hand. Pieter stood slowly up, clutching his wine-glass, staring with one little furious eye at his laughing son.

'Away out of here!' he shouted.

'Yes, that's what I keep telling him,' the innkeeper's wife joined in. 'Who is the boy?'

'That,' Adriaen explained, pointing, 'is my father!'

Pieter put down his glass on the bench behind and came forward, clenching and unclenching his fists, his eye glittering. Adriaen could see and smell that he was half drunk, and more angry and determined than he had ever known him. The girl picked up the wine-glass and began licking hopefully round the inside. This made Adriaen laugh again. His father lumbered towards him. But just then the innkeeper came up, frightened of a disturbance which might affect his trade, trying to combine firmness with oily subservience.

'Now then, friends, less noise! What's the matter?'

'This young sneak-thief won't go!' whined his wife.

'I'm going to kill the young devil!' Pieter roared, full of guilty and drunken aggressiveness.

The innkeeper, relieved that the cause of all the trouble was only a boy, turned on Adriaen without any of the oily subservience.

'You get away, or I'll take a stick to you!'

'But I only wanted to ask my father, here, for a few stivers to buy some food,' Adriaen said quietly.

'How do we know he's your father?'

'The boy came in here begging!'

'Stand away and let me hit the young devil!'

'You are my father, aren't you?'

Zonk! An iron cannon ball seemed to hit Adriaen full on the chest. He sat suddenly on the hard floor. There was his father's swollen red face glaring down, with the innkeeper and his wife trying to hustle him away. In the background the neglected girl still lolled on her bench, with hands lying supinely in her lap. There were a great many excited, jabbering faces all around

and above. The pain in his chest rumbled and tore, and he found himself admiring his father for hitting so hard. Then he was jerked to his feet, and plumped down in front of a table, on which were some slices of sausage. He remembered his hunger and crammed one into his mouth. A face with wild eyes, elongated nose, thin dribbling lines of hair on upper lip and chin, and a contorted wet mouth—all framed in a thick undergrowth of matted, ruddy hair—came suddenly close to his.

‘You’re the boy who arranged that comic procession a year or so back, eh?’ it shouted.

Adriaen nodded and went on gobbling sausage.

‘Good boy! I was there. Made me laugh—made me laugh till I split! Give the boy wine. He already has spirit!’

The mouth opened very wide, showing wet bright gums and a jumble of teeth, and laughed enormously, coming very close and then receding again into the distance.

Adriaen found a glass in his hand filled with yellow wine. He drank a little. It was sweet and warming. He drank some more and crammed his mouth full of sausage.

‘Was that your father?’ asked the face, settling down near by.

Adriaen nodded.

‘Then he’s a clod and a viper and a tumour—and I’d like to run him through and let his belly out!’

‘No; he’s not a clod, nor a viper. He’s a fool, if you wish, but he’s not hit me like that for years, and I didn’t think he could.’

The face bellowed its immense laughter again, rocking backwards and forwards.

'The boy is a good boy!' it shouted. 'Drink up your wine, boy, and have some more.'

Adriaen did so. He was enjoying it. His hunger was fading as warmth spread through his stomach. His chest throbbed, but was no longer actually painful. He ate more sausage and drank mouthfuls to wash it down. It was beautiful stuff, this wine, soft, cool, and sweet. No wonder his father came here to drink and his girl licked round the empty glass. He looked up.

'She's still there,' he said.

'Who, boy?' asked the face.

Adriaen pointed. The face bellowed:

'The bitch Mathilde! Why, she's part of the furniture—I remember her years ago.'

'My father finds her beautiful. . . . I wonder what has happened to my father?'

But Adriaen did not care what had happened to his father. A glow of soft fire was spreading all over him. Curious faces and shapes were beginning to sketch themselves in the notches, the clefts, and the spilt dregs on the table beneath his eyes. There was a molten haze in the air of the room, with the wild face, from which leapt stilled flames, hanging there like a monstrous, laughing sun. The din ebbed and flowed all round him. The fire within him was spreading out to the room, and soon the whole place, the whole world would flare up, and he would have set alight to it. This was the most wonderful, ecstatic feeling, that you had set the world alight; that you were the sun, in fact, not that face, whose hair was aflame; and that your father and the lumpish girl would burn together, with the house and the pigs and Hercules! Ah, terrible days! Terrible days! He had set the town alight, and the Spaniards had failed to do so. How glorious, how

superbly funny! He laughed, and the face was laughing, too, and shouting something, and then he was singing that song which they had sung in the procession. Every one was singing: the face, the room, the town, all the world. Then the world crashed in, and the flames leapt up to the sky. . . .

CHAPTER IV

PORTRAIT OF AN APPRENTICE PLAYER

I

ADRIAEN sat sweating on a hard bench, with his knees in the back of someone in front, and someone's bony knees sticking into him. The courtyard of the 'Red Cock' was tightly packed with folk, gaping up at the stage with their heads bent backwards, and sweating under the hot eye of the sun, which bored down into the deep well made by the three walls of the tavern. Two sides were of dark wood, full of windows, and with a faded blue wooden gallery running round. The third side, immediately behind the stage, consisted of stabling, with granaries above and a ramshackle stairway leading up to them. On the other side was a low stone wall with a gate in the middle. Beyond was one of those depressing patches of ground, part cultivated, part wild, part rubbish-heap, neither town nor countryside, where a midden stank luxuriantly. Beyond this straggled the tumble-down city wall.

On Adriaen's right sat his mother; on his left Mother Bannincx. Tears and sweat streamed down their cheeks. Adriaen listened intently, occasionally mopping his forehead with the back of his hand, quite oblivious of the flies buzzing round his head. Upon the stage—trestles supporting insecurely fastened planks which waved and creaked—Dido was taking a sorrowful farewell of Aeneas in clumsy verse. Aeneas, whose elongated nose, ruddy hair, and thin dribbling

moustache caused Adriaen's mind to keep wandering from the play to account for his familiarity, stood at the bottom of the steps, with spear and cloak in an attitude of heroic discomfort. Dido, with faded red garment, rakish head-dress, and bare, hairy arms outstretched, knelt at his feet and besought him in a squeaky baritone not to leave her, shaking her head continually to rid her face of a little shower of sweat-drops. But her pleadings were useless. With a magnificent gesture, Aeneas spurned her, mounted, proud, if wobbling, to the top step, and was there delivered in deafening tones of his final oration. After which he disappeared from view inside the granary, to reappear shortly afterwards, unofficially framed in its little window, with naked, red-haired torso, head tilted back and pint pot to mouth. Dido then burst into shrill lamentations, punctuated by lines of verse, drew a dagger from her bosom, plunged it with considerable vigour into the space between her arm and her body, fell heavily on to the planks, which waved and creaked, shrieked 'I die, I die!' and died.

The audience was moved, Adriaen laughed, and a round face appeared at the granary window to announce an interval—during which the box would be passed round—to be followed by clowning and dancing. The audience cheered, and began to chatter and move about.

Mother Bannincx turned to Adriaen.

'Are you enjoying it, Adriaen ?'

He came out of his day-dream and smiled.

'I 'd love to be one of the players.'

'It 's years since I saw them, and I cannot remember to have seen this play. Now tell me truthfully, boy, where did you get the money for this ?'

'I borrowed it—off father.' He laughed. 'He'll do anything for me now. I don't expect I'll ever pay him back.'

'Oh, but you must, Adriaen,' Anna protested.

'I will, if you 'll lend me the money.'

'I have some in my shop.'

'You don't mean to say that you 've sold something, mother! Who to? Madame Bannincx ?'

The old woman chuckled.

'You 're a very wicked boy! And I don't mind where the money came from. I haven't enjoyed myself so much for years, in spite of the heat and the flies. God's love! it 's pleasant to weep once more at someone else's imaginary sorrows.'

The face which had appeared at the granary window was suddenly there before them, above the collecting box, and Adriaen handed over his coins. They were bitten, rung, and carefully scrutinized before being thrown chinking in with the rest. Adriaen asked:

'What! Don't you trust us? We Brouwers are the most honest people in Oudenaarde.'

The only reply was a slight narrowing of a pair of hard little eyes in an expressionless face. Adriaen returned to his day-dreams.

A trumpet blew discordantly. The audience hushed immediately, settled into their places, and tilted back their heads ready to gape. . . .

Adriaen enjoyed the juggling, the two contortionists, and the final jig. When it was all over and time to join the hot, tightly-packed stream of people, slowly percolating through the tavern to the street with the patience of herded cattle, he followed his mother and old Bannincx with a sigh.

Anna took Mother Bannincx's arm to help her over

the cobbles. Adriaen walked a little behind them with his eyes on the ground. Anna looked back once and opened her mouth to bid him catch them up, but she shut it again on seeing him deep in thought, and sighed.

They turned down a narrow alley-way dark with cool shadow. Here, behind a door half torn off its hinges and windows which were more sacking than glass, Mother Bannincx lived.

'I won't invite you to my palace,' she said. 'There's only room inside for me and a cat.'

She cackled and looked up at them both, her eyes bright in their parched sockets.

'I've not had so much enjoyment for years. You may be a wicked young sinner, Adriaen, but this ugly old harridan is grateful to you. Here, lean down from your great height and give her a kiss.'

Adriaen absently bent down and touched her rough cheek with his lips. He heard a faint smacking noise and felt a little gust of hot breath round his ear. Then he straightened up.

'Ah, he's thinking important thoughts!' Mother Bannincx cackled again. 'Go along, then, young devil! You should be training for a great artist—not wasting your time with old women. Well, fare you well, both of you, and God bless you.' And she heaved at her drunken door, which clanged to behind her.

Anna turned away and Adriaen followed.

'Mother,' he said, almost immediately, 'I'm going back to the "Red Cock." I want to see those players.'

'Very well, Adriaen. I expect I shall see you back some time to-night.'

'Some time.'

He looked intently at her for a moment, then turned and disappeared quickly round the corner.

Anna walked along beside the Scheldt. The brown water flowed smoothly by, the roofs and spires of the town were massed in front of her, and she was sad, for Adriaen would not be here to see them much longer. He would be off soon—with a low company of players! Well, she could count herself lucky that he had stayed at home so long. When he was gone it was doubtful if she would see him again, and there would not be much left—her shop, her religion, her husband and his cough. Only the other night Adriaen had come in dead drunk—dead drunk at his age!—and his likeness in some ways to his father had been horrible. He, who was almost always so comfortingly different from Pieter, and so disconcertingly and lovably different from every one else!

When she reached home she found her husband seated at the table, self-righteously drawing the inevitable copy. He sighed a great deal, and was apparently too busy to notice her. At last he looked up with a feigned jerk of surprise.

‘Ah, there you are! I hope you liked the players. I have been working away here all the time. Must finish this by to-morrow, you know. . . .’

II

The tavern was filled with hot people, noise, coils of coarse smoke, and the stink of stale, slopped wine and ale. Patches of sunlight, dimmed by grimy glass, lay across the dirty floor and walls, picking out and vitalizing red faces swollen with drink. The host and hostess and a bothered boy rushed up and down with jugs and platters. Adriaen smiled to see the hostess give him a quick look, and then pretend that she had not

noticed him. He dodged his way between tables, in eager search. Mathilde, his father's seductress, lolling supinely, made a trade gesture at him. He smiled and shook his head. Then he heard a voice behind him: 'Glory to God! There 's that boy! Come here, boy, and get drunk again with us!' He turned and climbed round some benches, till he could seat himself opposite the face of the other night, and the Aeneas of this afternoon, whose real name appeared to be Jabbeke. Jabbeke filled a mug with wine, pushed it across, and presented, as Monsieur Visch, the man who had handed round the box. Visch scrutinized Adriaen with hard little unwinking eyes, and a disconcerting indifference on his round face. Adriaen returned the stare for a moment, deciding that a touch of vermillion round the eyes and a lipless slit for a mouth would be essentials in his caricature. Then he looked at the pinched woman whose hand lay flabbily in Visch's, except when it reached for his glass. Her colourless cheek lay against his shoulder, her eyes blinked sluggishly round the room. 'Venus and Adonis,' Adriaen murmured, and took a long drink at his mug. Jabbeke refilled it with an extravagant gesture. He did not seem to be able to do anything quietly. Adriaen wondered whether he was still on the stage in imagination; whether, in fact, he ever left it.

A faint, haunting sweetness of melody reached him. He looked round. This was not the place in which he expected to hear such sounds.

Sitting with his back half turned to them at the end of their table was a little man playing a flute. The white turn of his cheek and the loving curl of his lips, as they caressed the end of his instrument, intrigued Adriaen. He looked closer. Long fingers leaped

and twinkled like pale, writhing snakes, and a thin body was hunched in utter absorption. The eyes were closed.

Adriaen took a fragment of charcoal from his pocket, and started to rough out on the table the lines of the flutist's head. Jabbeke leaned across with a grin. After a few minutes he gave a sudden bellow.

'Ha! The likeness is good! The boy is a draughtsman!'

He gave Adriaen a clap on the shoulder which jogged his arm, making a thick smear.

'Now you 've spoilt it!' Adriaen cried.

'Spoilt it! The devil I have! Look, Bladelin, someone has done your portrait.'

The flutist did not appear to hear, so Jabbeke got up to poke him violently under the ribs with a long dirty finger. Adriaen watched Bladelin turn, lower his flute, slowly force himself back to the interior of the 'Red Cock' at Oudenaarde in Flanders. There was an appealing, freakish quality about his face which might have belonged to a child or an old man. What hair he had—and there seemed to be none on his face—was like tow. One corner of his mouth was raised in a little defensive smile.

'What 's that ?' he asked in a quick, high-pitched voice.

Jabbeke turned to Adriaen with a laugh.

'He 's always half asleep, this musician!' Then to Bladelin with a mock bow: 'Your likeness, sir, excellently done.'

Bladelin looked from one to the other, then peered rather short-sightedly after Jabbeke's pointing finger.

'He smudged it,' Adriaen complained.

Bladelin nodded vaguely and went on peering.

Suddenly he seemed to take in what he was looking at, and peered even more closely. Then he looked up at Adriaen. His light greenish eyes were inquisitive and understanding; yet they seemed to be taking in all sorts of irrelevancies at the same time. Adriaen smiled, and Bladelin smiled back cordially, without defensive, screwed-up mouth. Adriaen knew at once that he liked this little musician, and he was conscious of a thin, half-curious, half-unwilling stream of friendship flowing out towards him. Then the eyes twinkled and grew warmer, and finally there was a nod and a high-pitched whisper of 'Clever,' and Bladelin returned to the privacy of his music.

'You can draw, boy!' Jabbeke shouted across.

Adriaen nodded.

'Yes; and you can act. I enjoyed the play.'

'Ha! You were there, eh? The play is not much, but I am the best actor in Western Europe.'

Adriaen looked up at him quickly and saw that he was quite serious.

'I have fire. I have the stature of a hero, and the voice of a god'—he lowered his voice—'and yet, as you see, I have to play in the company of dolts and stinkards.'

'Stinkards,' said Adriaen, 'is certainly correct. And I agree that the play is not much——'

'*Dido* is a fine play,' Visch interrupted, hardly opening his slit of a mouth. 'That is, it would be if there was any one who could play *Dido*.'

'But only Aeneas matters!' Jabbeke turned on him. 'Of course I am not on the stage all the time. But Cwoop as *Dido*, I agree, is bad—very bad.'

'Cwoop, as you say, is very bad.'

'Very bad indeed,' Adriaen echoed.

'Is it your business, boy?' Visch glared at him, eyes like precious stones.

'It is. I will take his part. I shall be very good.'

Jabbeke's eyes opened so that the pupils stood out brilliantly from blood-shot yellowness. Adriaen laughed quietly and drank some more wine.

'Well, why not?' Jabbeke asked Visch.

But just then a loud bellow of laughter came from down by the door. Every one looked round. Men half stood up to see, crouching with hands on knees, or clambering on to benches and tables. Even Visch's woman lifted her head from his shoulder and turned slowly, like a grazing cow disturbed.

The creature's eyes were staring and dark and vacant. Lank hair hung round his neck. His big blubber lips drooped open. His arms were bent in front of his body, and his red hands dangled loosely downwards from his wrists. He shambled along uncannily, like a crab, knocking into tables. He did not notice the laughter and curses.

As he passed by, Adriaen jumped up and shambled after him with an exact imitation, adding a little froth at the lips. Louder laughter, clapping, and people stood up all round the room to watch. So they went, the idiot and Adriaen, until they met the host at the end of the room hurrying forward, anxious as usual for the good name of his house.

The idiot stopped and bubbled gibberish, looking at the host out of the corner of his eyes. Adriaen mimicked, and there was a shout of laughter. The innkeeper could stand no more. He seized the idiot by the arm and began dragging him roughly towards a side door. Adriaen went after them, bubbling in frothy imitation, and as they reached the door he adroitly tripped the innkeeper,

who stumbled and fell heavily, bringing the idiot down on top of him.

Jabbeke rose to meet Adriaen when he returned and drank his health. Visch stared at him appraisingly. His woman was still giggling thickly, throbbing up and down so that Visch had to nudge her in the stomach with his elbow, and she stopped with a gasp.

'The boy can act!' Jabbeke roared. 'Drink more wine, boy. We will have him, Visch. God sent the madman so that the boy could display his talent. He can draw. He can act. He can drink. What further would you have? Listen, Visch. . . .'

He moved along the bench, putting an arm round Visch's neck, so that the woman looked up disgruntled and nestled her head into a new position.

Adriaen felt a touch on his hand, and turned to meet Bladelin's greenish, reproachful eyes and crooked, defensive little smile.

'It was cleverly done. Oh, yes, you are clever. But the Church teaches us——'

'Which Church?'

'The Church teaches us to be charitable towards sufferers.'

'That sufferer has never been so popular before.'

'Don't quibble. He can't help being daft.'

'Nor can he help being funny.'

'He made me want to weep.'

'Why weep? There's so much pain and misery in the lives of people like us that if we were all Bladelins we should be perpetually in tears. I prefer laughing.'

'Perhaps. Laughter for you, tears for me. But I still think your mimicking was cruel.'

'It made scores laugh.'

'Maybe. But it was cruel.'

'Cruelty is as much a part of our lives as pain. What about the Spaniards? Besides, he's too daft to realize that every one was laughing at him. He's only just rather more of an animal than all these people here.'

'So they laugh and you mimic—and you both prove your superiority?'

'Perhaps. I've only just thought of it, but it seems to me that laughter is the only way to treat suffering—one's own or any one else's. Laughter and wine.'

Adriaen emptied his glass and refilled it from Jabbeke's pitcher, thinking of his own righteous indignation over little Sas. Yes; he was inconsistent. Yet Bladelin could sympathize quite impersonally. He shrugged his shoulders and turned to listen to Visch and Jabbeke.

Jabbeke was emphasizing his points by poking Visch in the chest with a forefinger. Visch was looking at Mathilde, his face puffily offensive—an expression which apparently went with worried thought. His woman was snoring. Jabbeke was saying:

'The boy can mimic. Mimicry is the true foundation of the player's art. I myself was a notorious mimic when his age. Moreover, he has a smooth, pleasing face. He could play the women's parts instead of that fool Cwoop, who has the face of a young pig added to the capability of a cockroach. Moreover, he is a boy of spirit. Moreover, he can drink creditably. Moreover, I like the boy. And moreover, he will want little money, if any.'

Jabbeke sat back triumphantly, playing a part all the time. Adriaen saw renewed interest in Visch's eyes.

'That is right,' said Adriaen, and Jabbeke jumped round in surprise. 'You will give me shelter and my share of food, and perhaps Jabbeke will pay for my drinking sometimes, since he commends it. In return

I will play for you. And in a very short time, you 'll see, Jabbeke will only be the second best actor in Western Europe.'

He laughed, but Jabbeke took it seriously, and his pupils again detached themselves brilliantly from the surrounding yellow.

'You can come as an apprentice,' said Visch grudgingly, 'your food as wages. You will join us for rehearsal to-morrow morning. To-morrow evening we start for Alost, and go on through Malines, Lierre, Antwerp, Bergen-op-Zoom, Breda, and so north to Amsterdam. I will train you as we go along. And now we will drink to our bargain.'

They clinked glasses, Jabbeke emptied the pitcher into his mug and shouted for more wine, a pipe, and tobacco.

Adriaen sat back content. No more slaving at ill-designed and uninspired scenes from ancient mythology. He would paint when he liked and what he liked—Bladelin's warm smile, and Jabbeke's dilated pupils, and Visch's hard, indifferent face staring salaciously at Mathilde. And Antwerp was ahead. He would be able to apprentice himself to a master-painter there if he wanted. Meanwhile, it would be fun acting. He liked Bladelin, and the others made him laugh. He would mock them unmercifully. There would always be new people and places. But there was his mother to say good-bye to.

Jabbeke was puffing harsh tobacco smoke from a clay pipe, with a dreamy expression on his face. Adriaen noticed that he had ceased to act, and had become an ordinary, complacent, rather shabbily striking man. Was it the effect of the tobacco?

'Does it taste good?' he asked, as he pulled out

his charcoal and began to sketch Jabbeke's face on the table.

Jabbeke shook his head. 'You get used to the taste of the hemp,' he answered, in a low drowsy voice, quite unlike his usual bawl. 'The drugs they put in to eke out the supplies send you into delicious sleep. Ah, but the dreams . . . the feelings! . . . It is about one thousand times better than being drunk. . . .' He broke off and gazed vacantly over Adriaen's head, taking the pipe out of his mouth and forgetting to put it back.

'I must try some,' Adriaen said, but Jabbeke did not appear to hear him. He looked round. The room had emptied, though labourers still sprawled on tables or benches, with open snoring mouths, their pipes either between their fingers, or lying broken in pieces on the floor, smouldering quietly with tall blades of smoke. He must try this pipe-smoking—evidently the poor man's vice. He half rose to call the hostess and then remembered he had no money. He would borrow some from Visch. But Visch was busy bargaining with Mathilde across his sleeping mistress.

Suddenly Jabbeke lolled over on to Visch's other shoulder. Visch turned angrily. Then he slid himself carefully out backwards, so that his late mistress and Jabbeke toppled sideways on to each other. Neither awoke. Visch stood up and looked at them for a moment, then followed his new mistress from the room.

Adriaen laughed, emptied the jug of wine over both sleepers, and went out.

III

It was cooler this evening in the courtyard of the 'Red Cock,' though the dust from the flurry of packing everything into the waggon still hung about in the quiet

air. The brown horse, known as Willem, stood ready in the shafts, blinking slowly round at the onlookers, flicking with a mangy tail at flies which hovered round its sores and perched inquisitively upon the bones sticking out of its sweating skin. Seats and benches leaned chaotically against the walls. Two men lay snoring in the only sunny patch. The inevitable crowd stood gaping at the piled-up waggon. Fowls pecked perseveringly in the dust. The hostess and one or two women leant giggling over the gallery of the inn-wall, while, below them, Jabbeke was being suggestively humorous to their mutual satisfaction. Beyond the low wall the midden steamed and stank.

Adriaen stood a little apart from the others, chatting to his mother and father and Mother Bannincx. Pieter Brouwer, who had learnt of Adriaen's decision without daring to protest, was now giving him much advice on the snares of this world, sprinkled with coughs, and such examples from his own experience as were calculated to show him in a good light. The eyes of Anna and Mother Bannincx were fixed upon Adriaen—Bannincx's with an affectionate wondering, Anna's hungrily, as if trying to paint his portrait indelibly on her mind. Adriaen was watching the preparations for departure, eager to be finished with this wretched business of saying good-bye. No one was listening to Pieter.

'And now, my son,' he was saying, 'I propose to make you a gift. Out of my poverty I give you what I can, with my blessing.'

Adriaen caught the word 'gift,' and turned his head in curiosity. Three crowns lay on his father's palm.

'Thank you, father.' Pieter's eyes shifted as soon as Adriaen looked into them. 'But I'm sure you'd

better keep them for' — he smiled — 'for other necessities.'

'Don't be stupid, boy!' snapped Mother Bannincx.

'Take them,' Anna joined in. 'And this one as well.' She held out another coin.

'Oh, no, mother!' Adriaen exclaimed. 'Why, that must be all the earnings from your shop for a twelve-month. I really don't want them, though. Please give them—to Madame Bannincx. She needs them more than me, and she's sure to spend them in mother's shop.'

'This is ridiculous!' Bannincx burst out, her voice soaring and creaking with indignation. 'The father and the mother hold out such gifts as they can afford and this ludicrous boy is too proud to take them!'

Adriaen laughed.

'I agree it's ridiculous—but I'm not too proud, Mother Bannincx. The money would be stolen off me, or I should spend it in a few minutes.'

'Oh! You make me mad!' And Mother Bannincx snatched the coins away from his parents and thrust them at Adriaen.

The crowd suddenly woke up from its lethargy and drew back laughing from the entrance to the tavern. Visch had come out with two women—one in favour, Mathilde, who had tempted the Brouwers, father and son, with varying success, slopping dutifully along by his side; one out of favour, who had snored upon his shoulder the previous evening, striving to tug him back into the tavern. And all the time he was trying to be dignified, as became the leader of a company of players. Adriaen roared with laughter as he went nearer, followed by his mother and Bannincx. He looked round to see if Pieter was coming, but his father was

pretending to converse with the two men asleep in the only sunny patch.

The onlookers were being facetious to their own great satisfaction. ‘Mother of God!’ they shouted, ‘won’t they scratch each other to ribbons?’ and ‘Shouldn’t be so devilish handsome, Monsieur Visch!’ Visch stumbled angrily through them, trying every now and again to wrench himself free from his old love, who struggled with an energy born of fear which amazed Adriaen. Mathilde, meanwhile, minced complacently along.

Arrived at the waggon, Visch turned from Mathilde to seize his late mistress’s arm and twist it till she shrieked and dropped like a sack to the ground, writhing, clutching her wrist and moaning. Visch glared at her puffily and offensively for a moment. Then he glared at the crowd, which silenced them, except for one or two sniggerers, and they gaped down at his victim. Some of them kicked at her tentatively. Then he seized Mathilde and slung her roughly up into the waggon, where she remained perched on its side, with as much animation as a stage property.

Anna and Adriaen stepped forward, picked up Visch’s cast-off, and carried her sobbing into the tavern. Mother Bannincx and Pieter went after them.

She kept moaning:

‘Oh, what can I do now? Where shall I go?’

Adriaen thought he had never seen such large tears as those squeezing out of her frightened, bleary eyes.

‘Have you nowhere to go?’ Anna asked.

‘No! I’ve been with him for four years now. I’m from Courtrai. I know no one here. I have nothing. What can I do?’

‘Poor woman! Poor woman!’

'She can come back to my home,' said Mother Bannincx gruffly, 'until we can think of . . .'

The door burst suddenly open, and Jabbeke stood there in just the right dramatic posture.

'We are waiting for you!' he bawled to Adriaen.
'We are about to take the road!'

'Comrade! I come!' Adriaen bawled back, parodying speech and gesture.

The door slammed to, and Adriaen faced his mother. Old Bannincx pretended to busy herself with the sobbing woman, while Pieter was tracing patterns on a table with his finger-nail.

'Good-bye, mother,' said Adriaen, kissing her cheek.

'Good-bye, Adriaen,' said Anna, kissing his cheek.

'Perhaps I 'll see you again one day!'

'Perhaps. Now, son, do try to keep out of prison, if you can.' They both laughed. 'And try to remember you 're a painter, not a player. God help you!'

'Adriaen, my son,' his father began, sticking out his chest and looking at Anna, 'the time has come . . .'

Adriaen bolted for the door.

'Say good-bye to me, young devil!' Mother Bannincx screamed. He went back, and they pecked each other's cheeks. 'God bless you!' she whispered, patting his arm. 'And come back to your mother. . . . I 'll stay and look after this woman. You two go and wave your farewells.'

In the courtyard all was ready. As soon as he saw Adriaen coming, Visch whipped up the horse. The waggon lurched forward, and a couple of planks and a stool fell off, while Mathilde tumbled backwards clutching the air. Jabbeke saved her. Visch swore.

Adriaen hoisted up the planks and the stool. Visch whipped the horse again and looked round quickly.

Jabbeke made a grab at Mathilde. The waggon moved slowly out through the gateway, swaying about on the uneven ground, with Jabbeke spreadeagled over most of its contents to prevent further accident. The rest of the company walked behind.

Adriaen turned and waved. His parents waved back. He wished his mother had given way a little. Her bravery made it harder. Then he was glad that she hadn't. He thought that he would probably never see either of his parents again. He did not mind in the least about his father. He remembered that he had not said good-bye properly to Pieter. He turned again to give him an extra wave. But they had both disappeared. He felt rather hurt, until he realized how sensible his mother was being.

Out in the street quite a little crowd was waiting, amongst whom Adriaen was delighted to see many of his old friends, the 'Urchins.' They waved and shouted to each other. Dusk was beginning to flow down from the top of the sky upon Oudenaarde. The waggon bumped and swayed over the rough road. Then there came a bump larger than the others, and Mathilde toppled and fell to the ground, bringing with her a bench and a box of properties.

CHAPTER V

PORTRAIT OF A PLAYER

I

WILLEM, the horse—the ‘Centaur,’ Adriaen called him—staggered over the uneven track, with steaming flanks, head hanging down, and a cloud of flies, at which his mangy tail twitched half-heartedly. The waggon and its crazy load jerked and squeaked along between unyielding ruts and over bumps and loose stones. Adriaen was at Willem’s head, encouraging him forward with a variety of helpful noises, from cluckings of the tongue to a recital of his part in the new play. Willem’s eye was glazed, however, his hoofs kept slipping, and he was disappointingly unresponsive. Sitting in the front of the waggon, a long peacock’s feather in his hat, Jabbeke kept up a stream of cheerful abuse and cracked his whip, occasionally laying it across Willem’s back. Squatting uncomfortably beside Jabbeke, Visch tried to sleep in the early morning sun, his large head bobbing to the waggon’s lurches, his slit of a mouth open surprisingly wide. Bladelin walked at one side, humming to himself, hands behind his back, head poked forward rather like Willem’s, a smile on his face, and a couple of toes appearing through one of his boots. Mathilde dangled her legs over the back of the waggon, chewing a lump of cheese, each morsel of which she examined critically all over before popping it into her mouth, which remained open during mastication. She was looking idly at the man who walked just beneath her,

and who kept touching her ragged blue skirt with a lumpish hand and looking furtively up. But it was doubtful whether she really noticed him. Nor was he particularly worth noticing. He wore a shabby hat on the back of his head from which sprang a mouse-coloured fringe. Underneath, timid eyes, set too close together, blinked in the middle of a pimply face. His short sturdy legs were wreathed in wrappings of various faded colours. He sweated enormously. His name was Cwoop.

They could see the village to which they were going on a slight rise away to their left, with church tower piercing upwards, smoke rising on the still air, cattle grazing near by, and a background of full-foliaged trees. Visch had wanted to get there quickly, for it was Sunday and Steenwyk was one of the few villages in the neighbourhood with a Calvinist congregation. Visch and Bladelin, to Adriaen's surprise, were both enthusiastic Calvinists—Bladelin rabidly so. For this reason they had had to start early, as the last stars were vanishing above the little isolated farm where Visch had begged accommodation for himself and Mathilde. The rest of them had had to sleep the night in the out-buildings. This was the usual state of affairs.

The ground dipped suddenly in front of them, and the road twisted down between banks to a stream flowing gently across it. Willem's legs trembled as he went downhill, and Adriaen hastened to the back wheels to prevent the waggon's heavy weight from rushing the horse bodily to the bottom. They reached the stream with a splash and a bump which almost shot Mathilde off. And there they stayed.

Adriaen went forward to see what had happened. The wheels were a foot deep in the mud at the bottom

of the stream. Willem stood drooping between the shafts, steaming mildly, only half conscious. Adriaen took his head, murmuring: ‘Come on, old Centaur.’ The Centaur stumbled forward on to its skinny knees and remained there. Seeing some water it lapped feebly. Visch yawned, swore, clambered down and tugged at the harness, one foot in the stream. This time Willem sagged and collapsed completely into the water, moving his head slowly from side to side. Jabbeke stood up on the waggon and lashed at him, his eyes starting, yellowed, and bloodshot, bawling out: ‘Get—up—you—brute!’—a word to each lash. Visch tugged and tugged, and Cwoop kicked at Willem’s quarters.

They were all startled by a screech of ‘Stop!’ Adriaen jumped round to see Bladelin splashing through the water, his face like chalk, his eyes mad. He rushed at Visch, caught him by the coat, heaved him backwards so that he sat heavily in the stream. This made Adriaen laugh. But only for a moment. Bladelin jumped up on to the waggon shafts. Jabbeke struck out half-heartedly with his whip. But Bladelin caught it, wrenched it out of his hand, and hit back so that Jabbeke had to turn and jump simultaneously, to fall sprawling on to the road. Adriaen’s mouth widened to a smile, but before he could laugh Bladelin had begun his denunciation. He stood, rather precariously, on the waggon, whip in hand, the dying horse beneath him, his tow-coloured hair sticking out all round his head, his green eyes darting furiously at the men below him, and screeched at them. Adriaen was astonished at the torrent of obscenities which cascaded from the mouth of this gentle musician. Even Mathilde was shaken out of her usual torpor, appearing from behind

the waggon to listen with bulging eyes and a piece of cheese half-way to her mouth.

He cursed them for their bestial cruelty to the horse. He drew parallels and adduced proofs from the Holy Scripture to show that their ferocity had earned them centuries of torture in hell, which he described in vivid detail. He pointed out how vastly inferior in pure cruelty had been the Spanish Inquisition of the Low Countries in the immediate past. He was beginning to describe the scene at the Day of Judgment, when from over the fields rolled the faint, deep clang of the church bell of Steenwyk.

He stopped in mid-sentence, and there was silence for a few moments. Then he wiped his forehead with his sleeve and said quietly:

'We shall be late for the service, Visch. We must go at once.'

The spell broke. Adriaen wanted to clap, Jabbeke crossed himself hastily, and Cwoop squatted beside Willem and began stroking him. The piece of cheese was popped into Mathilde's mouth, where Adriaen watched its last moments. Bladelin jumped down from the waggon and went towards Visch.

'We must go quickly, Visch.'

Visch's eyes glittered at him.

'How can I go? My clothes are wet.'

'Wet, are they? You must change them. You cannot miss this opportunity. . . . At once, now!'

They all stared. Visch's fist clenched and drew back. But Bladelin was suddenly conscious of the whip in his hand, and threw it quickly from him. It fell into the stream, and they watched it twirling slowly away from them. Then Visch shouted:

'Mathilde! Get my box from the waggon.'

They all crouched round Willem. He lay with his head half in the stream. His eyes were lifeless, his skin twitched occasionally, and the flies buzzed above him.

'We must put him out of his pain,' Bladelin said.

'But how?'

'Your knife.' Bladelin shivered. 'God forbid that I should have to do it.'

'We might drown him in the stream,' Adriaen suggested. 'He won't struggle much, poor devil. You go to your service, Bladelin. While you are away I will sit on his head and pray for his soul. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse will have a spare charger, and I shall have a wet posterior.'

'Thank you.'

'No one seems to consider what we are going to do now for a horse to drag our waggon,' Cwoop said in his prim, stuttering voice.

Jabbeke slapped him on the back, and Cwoop winced.

'Good! That is important. You may be a grotesquely bad poet and playwright, but you have sense. What is to be done about a horse?'

Cwoop turned on him, blinking rapidly.

'To the devil with the horse! My play is excellently done!'

'Your play is offal!'

'You ruin it with your——'

Jabbeke's hand shot out, and, knocking Cwoop's hat off, clasped a handful of his mousy hair.

'Stop it—fools!' Visch interrupted. He had reappeared in a dull green jerkin and some patched yellow hose, taken from the acting box. 'You are to remove this thing—he kicked Willem, and Bladelin's eyes blazed—'and push the waggon up the hill there.'

'But, Visch . . .'

'Come, Bladelin.'

Adriaen watched them walking off, talking earnestly together, quarrels forgotten in their efforts to compose their minds to receive 'the consolations of religion.'

'May he rot in hell!' growled Jabbeke.

'He will,' said Adriaen. 'But don't worry about this waggon. I'll just kill off this horse, and then I'll go and get another. There are sure to be some near the village.'

II

They had slept a few nights later at a farm a mile or so outside Lierre; or rather Visch had lain in the farmhouse, drunken and satisfied: the others had had to shift for themselves. Visch was tired of Mathilde now, though he continued to make use of her as a servant. She accepted the situation phlegmatically, but Jabbeke and Cwoop had spent most of the night hopefully dodging each other outside the loft where she had settled herself. Adriaen had watched this comedy for some time, keeping both parties informed of the whereabouts of the other and warning Mathilde of the approach of either, until he was bored, when he climbed into an upper window of the farmhouse. Here the farmer and his wife thought him the devil, and hid under their bed-clothes until he left the room. Below he found Visch lying sozzled on the floor. He finished up the remains of Visch's supper, wrapped himself in Visch's cloak, and went to sleep with his head pillowed on Visch's stomach.

To-day, after a final rehearsal of Cwoop's play, they were to enter Lierre, and, while Visch obtained a

licence and made arrangements with the burgomaster, they would prepare the stage in the courtyard of a tavern and cry the performance through the town. After a few days in Lierre they were going to Antwerp, where they would stay some weeks before starting north for Amsterdam.

Cwoop bustled about the farmyard with his manuscript, blinking importantly, while a mongrel sniffed suspiciously at his heels. A few ducks sailed upon the slimy waters of a pond. The farmyard was filled with straw and litter, fowls, a mule, and pigs. Heavy clouds were massed overhead. The farmer and his wife—a white-haired old couple—leaned benevolently from one of the windows, and their brood of dirty children wriggled and pushed and chattered on top of a stone wall. The family had been invited to watch the rehearsal. Jabbeke strutted and ranted among the muck, as rapt in his part as if on a stage. Visch boomed forth his lines apathetically. Bladelin sneezed and looked vaguely uncomfortable. Cwoop blinked and fussed and stopped the actors continually, turning occasionally to frown at the children on the wall who were noisily unimpressed. Drops of rain began to fall. Every one, except Bladelin, looked up at the sky, and Jabbeke shook his fist at the clouds. The farmer shouted cheerfully across:

‘Going to have some rain!’

The actors scowled at him, and Cwoop consulted his manuscript. He looked up, blinking.

‘Enter the Duchess of Naples! Where in the devil’s name is the Duchess of Naples? Brouwer? Brouwer!’

‘Devil take the boy!’ Visch growled. ‘Where is he? Brouwer! Brouwer!’

Jabbeke shouted: ‘Brouwer!’ Cwoop and Visch

shouted: ‘Brouwer!’ The children on the wall and the farmer and his wife all shouted: ‘Brouwer!’ The mongrel, excited by the noise, snapped joyfully at Cwoop’s heels. The fowls squeaked and flapped away. The drops began to come down more thickly. Bladelin took his flute from his belt and played a few meditative trills. The children leaped off the wall and made a dash at him. His eyes darted and smiled, he laughed, and began to play a jig. The children danced round him, shrieking, throwing their arms and legs about. The old couple at the window beamed and clapped their hands in time to the tune. Cwoop shouted at Bladelin who appeared not to hear. Visch and Jabbeke shouted for Adriaen. The mongrel deserted Cwoop to join in the dance. The rehearsal became a chaos.

Visch and Jabbeke, attracted by some smoke issuing from a window, discovered Adriaen at last in a hay loft. He lay face downwards on the floor in a smiling stupor. Near him was a clay pipe filled with smouldering tobacco, some of which had tumbled out and fallen among the hay. Heavy smoke was filling the loft. Kneeling beside Adriaen, stroking his hair, was Mathilde.

Visch let forth an oath, as his head came up through the trap-door of the loft. Mathilde turned slowly, and her mouth opened a shade wider. She shook Adriaen, but he lay like a fallen tree. Visch scrambled up, walked across to Mathilde, and gave her a punch on the jaw. She crumpled up without a sound, and lay across Adriaen.

Coughing and swearing, Visch and Jabbeke tipped the smouldering hay out of the window where the increasing rain hissed amongst it. Then they carried down Mathilde and Adriaen and laid them in the farmyard.

Bladelin broke off his jig, and every one crowded round.

'What's the matter?' Bladelin asked anxiously.

'Bah—he's only pipe-drunk,' Visch answered contemptuously. 'He must have taken the old woman's tobacco—strong enough to drug a city, it is. But he nearly set the place on fire. Mathilde was with him, so I hit her. They'll be better soon. Leave 'em there.'

'Perhaps she loves him,' Bladelin said.

'Well, she's my woman,' Visch growled.

'But you're tired of her yourself, Visch!' Jabbeke protested. 'If she's not yours she's mine!'

'No! She's mine!' Cwoop shouted.

'It seems to me,' said Bladelin, 'that she's Adriaen's.'

Visch clenched his fist. Jabbeke, hands on hips, poked his elongated nose into Bladelin's face. Cwoop shook his manuscript at him.

Bladelin laughed.

'And now, if you'll all please move away, I'm going on playing for these children.'

'But what about my rehearsal?' Cwoop wailed.

Bladelin put his flute up to his mouth. The three men stared at him, hesitating. The children began to dance. And the rain pattered down on all of them.

III

In Antwerp Adriaen was thankful to get away from the rest of the company, who were living at the tavern where they gave their performances. He and Bladelin were with a friend of Bladelin's, a wood-carver named Baudouin—Bladelin was always meeting close friends in unlikely places—with whom Adriaen was supremely happy.

For the last few weeks he had felt the itch to handle paint and talk about art. This acting business was an impoverished form of creation. You were not your own master. You had to do what some fool like Visch or Cwoop told you. You had to acclaim insipid couplets, which you were certain you could have written very much better. But there were times when it was thrilling to move an audience. You felt—Here are an even bigger lot of fools than we are, and it is amusing to make them weep one moment and smile the next. You experienced a sense of Godlike power at being able to make them feel what you wanted, and, at the same time, an un-Godlike contempt—except that what you made them feel wasn't your own idea. It was Cwoop's, perhaps—you had to make them swallow stale Cwoop, and they did so with relish.

Yes—it was good to be rid of the constant society of the other members of the company. They were really as stupid and sheeplike as their audiences. But they had made him laugh. He had fooled them continuously, and when they had recovered their tempers they all curried his favour. All except Visch. There was something to respect in Visch. He always got his own way. He was a ruthless and usually successful tradesman, and nothing else. But why should the others mind what Adriaen thought of them? He was much the youngest. Perhaps it was because he did not care in the least what they thought. They were all afraid—even Visch, who was frightened for the safety of his money wallet in this world, and that of his soul in the next.

Adriaen enjoyed himself in Baudouin's studio, grinding and mixing the colours for the wooden Madonnas

and saints and angels. In return Baudouin sometimes gave him lessons in drawing. But most of the time Adriaen watched him at work, while Bladelin sat in a corner and improvised on his flute. It gave Adriaen enormous pleasure to watch Baudouin's strong, deft, flat-nailed fingers handling his shining implements, to see the pale slivers of wood stand up from the main block and then flutter to join the deep litter on the floor, to observe the absorbed serenity of Baudouin's face as he worked. Baudouin was short and heavily built. He wore a pale blue overall, the same colour as his calm eyes. His face was florid and pleasant, and he had a tousle of greying hair, on which, when he was working, he perched a little blue cap to keep out the dust. The studio was ankle-deep in shavings, sawdust, and litter. It was a long attic room, and its windows, patched here and there with sacking, looked out across uneven roofs. Blocks of wood were propped against the walls. Glue-pots and crucibles of colour, brushes, carving instruments were strewn about with half-finished figures, broken statues, and one or two threadbare draperies. There was a big 'Madonna and Child,' which Baudouin carved when he was not working on anything else, and which was intended as a gift for the cathedral, when, if ever, it was finished. There was a delicious smell of sawdust, resin, glue, and oil which Adriaen sniffed greedily as he sat on the work-table swinging his legs.

'You know, this is no training for a painter,' Baudouin said constantly, 'sitting there and watching a wood-carver at work.'

Adriaen laughed.

'Surely? I'm mixing your colours, and all the time I'm learning anatomy and drapery from watching you.'

And I like to see someone doing a job with perfect competence.'

'Well, if you want to be a painter you won't stay idling here.'

'I am idle, I always shall be. Besides, I know I can paint. And I enjoy being with you. You're such a peaceable contrast to Visch and Jabbeke.'

And he wrapped one of the old draperies round himself, snatched up an implement, and gave an imitation of one of Jabbeke's speeches, while Baudouin and Bladelin laughed.

Sometimes Adriaen drew a sketch of Baudouin at work, Bladelin fluting, or the actors quarrelling round a tavern table, and tinted them with Baudouin's colours. Baudouin studied these eagerly and pointed out a fault here and there, but mostly he chuckled in a satisfied way, and once or twice he gave a crow of joy and took Adriaen's hand in his and patted it. He pinned up the sketches carefully on his walls in what he considered their order of merit.

Sometimes they went to the churches for which Rubens was painting altar-pieces, the vivid magnificence of which delighted Adriaen. He saw other pictures at the private houses of Baudouin's customers, and fell in love with those by Breughel.

'God, what a painter! What an understanding of us poor folk! Our stupidity, our fear—I never realized before that I love these peasants—and the beastly callousness of the Spaniards. The filthy swine! And what colouring, and what handling of crowds! Dear God, if I could do work like that!'

Sometimes Bladelin gave him lessons on the flute, which he enjoyed, partly for the music's sake, and partly for his teacher's. Bladelin laughed and clapped

his hands when Adriaen was successful, and stamped up and down cursing him when he played a false note, which he frequently did on purpose. They talked and argued incessantly, Bladelin deeply, almost wildly serious, Adriaen mocking, Baudouin benevolently preventing blows. They tried to write verses, laughed at each other's, and tore them up. Bladelin occasionally made a little money playing for dancing in taverns or at kermis, but always refused to join those who hired themselves out to the houses of the rich.

But Adriaen could not endure this placid life for too long. Now and then he had to borrow money off Baudouin—he knew that Bladelin would emphatically refuse it—and find a tavern in the harbour quarter. He drank with the Levantines, the French, the Genoese, the Venetians, the English, the Turks, mixtures of every race that went to sea and drifted to Antwerp. He made them laugh with his imitations, carried on conversation by signs, and threw himself whole-heartedly into their brawls, without any idea of why they were fighting, usually escaping serious injury, thanks to his strength. And always he sketched details of heads, hands, expression, and garments, giving them away afterwards to his unconscious models—who were frequently furious—or else to the tavern-keeper. When he was unable to borrow money he could usually rely on earning a drink or two by his sketches. Sometimes he smoked a pipe of drugged tobacco, fell into a torpor, and crawled home the next morning cursing humorously at himself. After these orgies Bladelin's eyes darted angrily, and he railed with shrill voice and crooked, defensive smile.

'You have talent. You can paint. You have some idea of music and poetry. You have humour, some-

times cruel. You are strong and handsome. God has been good to you. And you waste all this in riotous living. It's a monstrous sin at your age. Don't you want to be famous—a great painter ?'

'No. I just want to paint.'

'Oh, you're mad! If I had your opportunities, I'd . . .'

'Don't preach at me! I don't belong to your cursed sect.'

'Be careful, Adriaen. It's a worse sin to mock at the true religion than to waste Heaven's gifts.'

'Bladelin, Bladelin! You're as bad as my father! But you're wasting your breath. I shall live my own life as I want.'

'You've no right to. You must think of those who love you. I hate to see you ruin yourself.'

'You love me?'

'Yes, Adriaen—the devil knows why!'

'Then leave me alone.'

'Oh, you're haughty and indifferent!'

'You're a screeching, sanctimonious hypocrite!'

'I'd like to kill you!'

Adriaen laughed. 'You're not strong enough.'

But he was surprised that he was not assaulted. Bladelin seemed lit up with an insane white heat of fury.

However, after a moment he snatched up his flute and blew into it discordantly. Adriaen sat down and began to caricature him playing amongst a grotesque heavenly choir.

IV

One day as Adriaen and Bladelin were going through the Place, closed in with towering, elegant buildings, and filled with aimless crowds drifting round barrows

and stalls of flowers and fruit, their way was stopped by the Host carried in procession. Every one knelt and crossed themselves, but Adriaen was horrified to see Bladelin spit, shake his fist, and shriek a stream of invective. The procession passed quickly, and then there suddenly seemed nothing else in the world but bellowing mouths, bulging eyeballs, and brandished blades all round them. There was only one thing to be done. Adriaen leaped at Bladelin with ‘Filthy blasphemer!’ hit him moderately hard on the side of the head, picked him up, and pushed his way through the furious crowd. He came to an empty barrow, threw Bladelin on, and wheeled him away, shouting, ‘Filthy blasphemer!’ The crowd yelled, ‘Throw him in the river!’ ‘Filthy blasphemer!’ Adriaen answered. Looking back he saw the owner of the barrow being forcibly prevented from reclaiming his property. He laughed, and then began to wonder at the astonishing behaviour of Bladelin.

He wondered still more when he came in that same evening, to find Baudouin standing, pathetically anxious, beside Bladelin, who was sprawling on a tilted stool, his back against the wall, one foot on the table, his flute dangling from the listless fingers of one hand, his face palely sweating, his eyes staring. He took no notice of Adriaen, and Adriaen missed the smile of swift sweetness with which he was always greeted, except when drunk or half drugged.

‘Is he ill?’ Adriaen asked.

‘I came in and found him like this. I can’t do anything for him. He keeps mumbling to himself.’

Adriaen nearly burst out laughing at Baudouin’s childishly worried face.

They took it in turns to sit by Bladelin all night. He

did not stir. Adriaen wondered if it was the plague —there had been outbreaks in the city that summer. He fell asleep as it grew lighter, but Bladelin's delirium awoke him.

' . . . Swinish Jesuit, inhuman devil! May you rot in hell! . . . God be praised! I spat in the face of their god to-day. And Adriaen hit me. He hit me! . . . Marthe, I will unlock my chamber door at midnight. . . . You shot him dead! A pistol—not even the sword! Father of our people, he shot you dead, the swinish, Spanish Jesuit! O Father, have mercy on the soul of our father . . . William, our saviour, and a little obscene Jesuit. . . . The life paths of the very great and the most repulsively obscene cross, and bang! Not even the sword! Flowers, white flowers strewn for the very great. Worms crawling through the eyeholes of the obscene Jesuit! Father in heaven, I will play my jig for William, our father on earth, and he will dance through the courts of the blessed. O Father in heaven, give this pain in my eyes to the little, crafty Spanish murderer. . . . Fetch me my sword from my chamber . . . '

He babbled on and on. What was all this madness? Adriaen wondered. 'William, our father on earth, and an obscene Jesuit'? This was what came of 'religious consolation.' God shield him from all obsessions, whether of religion, of sex, of—yes, even of drink! Poor Bladelin! He was lovable in spite of everything.

The fever gradually disappeared. Bladelin apologized to Adriaen one day:

'I'm afraid I've been troublesome. I am—like that, occasionally. Did I talk—much?'

'Yes.'

'I'm grateful to you, Adriaen.'

'I'm not grateful to you. You worried me.'

'I can't remember what happened—before I fell ill.'
Adriaen told him.

'You were wrong to interfere.'

'That idiot crowd would have torn you to bits.'

'I should have died a martyr's death.'

'Martyr, my rump! You would have died a messy death. Besides, I didn't want you to die.'

'You didn't? That's good news!'

His eyes were darting, and his voice high-pitched and maudlin. Adriaen got up, handed him his flute, and prepared to go.

'Where are you going, Adriaen?'

'Out.'

'You're going to a tavern. I know it. I know it! Adriaen, don't. You mustn't!'

'Very well.'

Bladelin sank back with a sigh. Adriaen tiptoed out and walked to the nearest tavern.

V

The audience were not liking Cwoop's tragedy. Adriaen was not surprised. He thought that Visch had gone too far when he announced that he had engaged the courtyard of the best inn at Amsterdam. There had been few companies in Amsterdam lately, and Visch hoped that the rich would come and that consequently he could put up his prices. The rich had come, and they objected to the prices, the uncomfortable benches, the stuffy courtyard, and the play. And they were saying so, loudly and frequently. Orange-peel was beginning to litter the stage. Adriaen had received more than one nut on the side of his head from

the galleries. Those on the floor were shuffling and stamping their feet, and cheering ironically at Jabbeke's rhetoric. Visch stood about the stage, biting his nails and gazing morosely. Jabbeke was trying to drown them with his enormous voice, peering at them fearfully out of the corner of his eyes. Cwoop blinked and trembled and stuttered. Bladelin, sweating with rage, was acting unusually well.

Adriaen grew angrier and angrier. Of course it was an idiotic play and they were a ludicrous company of actors, except perhaps Jabbeke, but they were doing their best. And these dolts in front had been encouraged in their catcalling by a set of drunken, foppish, complacent young upstarts, who had obviously set out to ruin the play as their afternoon's entertainment. There they were, standing at the side, encouraging the rest of the audience, shouting obscene remarks to each other about the actors, drinking, eating nuts and sweets, and throwing the refuse on to the stage. And, because they were rich and over-dressed and ill-mannered, all the others followed their lead. Adriaen frowned and gesticulated at them, and the more he did so the more they laughed and mimicked him, and the angrier he became—until he realized that he was playing into their hands. Heaven be praised, they were near the end! Only the murder scene, which finished the play, and then the clowning and the jig.

Jabbeke lay asleep on the stage, flamboyantly graceful, and Adriaen, as the heroine, crept on to kill him with a dagger, and make the final and utterly insipid speech. Jeers, shouted obscenities, and a dead mouse greeted him. Ignoring the rest of the audience, he curtsied to the young fops at the side, hinted at a coarse gesture, picked up the dead mouse by the tail, and flung it at

them with: 'Big vermin seem to house little vermin.' The fops looked at each other and laughed louder than ever. Meanwhile, Adriaen, with dagger drawn, crept towards Jabbeke. He knelt for a moment beside his victim, dagger raised to strike, before beginning the final speech. The mouse once more whizzed past his head. He took no notice. His speech began with the words:

'In thy person do I slay

'All faithless ones, all tyrants, who . . .'

Instead, he shouted:

'In thy person do I slay

'All the effeminate young bastards of Amsterdam cursed with an excess of money ill-gotten in shady underhand commerce; all the hideous, stinking women of this audience and. . .'

But then the hubbub became a roar. People jumped to their feet, shaking their fists, yelling abuse, standing on benches and hurling at the actors anything that came to hand. Visch ran forward, arms outstretched, but received a shoe, thrown at short range, full in the face, and retired bloodily. Cwoop fled shrieking from the courtyard. Bladelin tried to distract the audience by screeching on his flute. And the fops headed a rush at the stage.

Jabbeke put himself in a heroic position of defence and shouted: 'Adriaen, we must sell our lives dearly!' Amusement at Jabbeke's characteristic posturing at this crisis, and a realization that at last this player had found a situation in real life comparable to those which he was continually enacting on the stage, and was, therefore, sublimely happy, followed each other rapidly through Adriaen's mind. Then the crowd were upon him. He saw dozens of angry, yelling faces coming at him,

faces which seemed to have lost all individuality in their idiot fury. He laughed at them contemptuously. Then he saw the fops pushing their way towards him. He made a rush forward. He caught their leader a most satisfying clout on the nose, and laughed to see blood spurt over an exquisite lace collar. A maddeningly futile little face, filled with waspish fury, suddenly appeared out of an exaggerated ruff just beside him, and spat in his face. He caught it by its prim dagger of a beard, pulled it towards him, bashed it in the eye, and let it flop against its neighbour. By God! this was fun. He'd show these little scented bastards that . . . But then something hit him very hard on the back of the head, the place roared at him, went black, except for squirming, fiery worms, and then poured thunderously down a vast vent in the earth. . . .

VI

Adriaen was first conscious of a steady thumping in his head, then a feeling of something softly silken under his chin, then whirling shapes before his eyes. Something moved by him, something cold and refreshing soothed his forehead. His mouth was opened, and something warming and delicious and familiar went in. With an effort he swallowed it and tried to smile, but his face seemed to crack painfully. Then time was apparently suspended. Several years later he opened his eyes. They took in first a pale yellow quilt, then grey walls, then the head and shoulders of two men with exactly the same white hair, white ruff, shining black clothes, and kindly nanny-goat faces.

He blinked and looked again. One of the men moved a little and smiled and said something. But the

other remained still, looking wisely goatish. This was peculiar. Was he in a tobacco trance?

'Why are there two of you?' he heard himself ask. One of the men answered:

'I shouldn't talk. Try to sleep again.'

'But who's your double over there?'

One of the men laughed suddenly, turned away to the wall, and returned to prop up his other self at the end of the bed. Adriaen tried to laugh, but it hurt too much.

'And who the devil painted that?' he whispered.

'Frans Hals.'

Adriaen looked at it until his head ached too painfully, then asked:

'Are you as genial a fellow as that?'

The man laughed.

'It's a fine piece of work, isn't it?'

'Where d'you say Hals lives?'

'Haarlem.'

'Then I'm going to Haarlem.'

'Not yet. You'll have to stay here for a day or two.'

'Give me some more of that brandy, will you?'

'If you promise not to talk.'

Adriaen watched him fill a lovely green glass. He drank, and felt pleasantly warmed in body and mind.

'Tell me what happened,' he whispered.

'You fought well, but you had no chance. And your play had no chance. It might have done in the lower quarters, but in the centre of the town—no. Your stage and your properties are in little pieces. And you yourself were responsible for that. I don't blame you, though. I admired your courage. That's why I had you brought to my house. And you hit my son a fine blow on the nose.'

'Did I?'

'Yes. He was the cause of it all. Young fool! Serve him right. He's sulking now at one of his friends' houses.'

'What happened to the other players?'

'I have no idea.'

'Did you see what became of a fellow playing the flute?'

'No.'

'I hope he's safe. I don't care about the rest much, they were a poor lot. But how can I find Bladelin?'

'Bladelin?'

'The flute-player.'

'I'll have inquiries made for you if you wish.'

'I'd be very grateful.'

'Very well. Now tell me, why d'you want to go to Hals?'

'I want to be a painter.'

'Well—I can give you a letter of recommendation.'

'I can't understand why you should be so kind to me.'

'You promised me not to talk. Sleep again.'

VII

Adriaen lay among some sacks in the stern of the barge. The sun warmed him and sleepy thoughts wandered through his mind. He had a round lump on the back of his head, and he shivered still from the unaccustomed after-effects of the thorough washing on which his host in Amsterdam had insisted. A good soul, his host had been—a merchant connoisseur, with a sense of humour, who had taken as great a delight as Adriaen in the display of his collection of pictures and *objets d'art*. He had arranged Adriaen's transport to

Haarlem in one of his barges, and given him some money and a letter of recommendation to Frans Hals. The crowns were in Adriaen's pocket, but he had forgotten the letter.

Adriaen was wondering what had happened to the other players after the fight. There had been no news of Bladelin. Well, he would probably never see any of them again. People with whom one was reasonably intimate seemed to drop right out of one's life. However, he could do just as well without them. Was Bladelin right in saying that he was haughty and indifferent? It didn't matter much, anyhow.

He looked lazily across the land on either side of the canal. He could still see Amsterdam behind him, standing out in diffused sunlight, vivid against heavy storm-clouds beyond. He supposed he would still be able to see it when he reached Haarlem. The land was as flat as the barge's deck—at first of a melancholy sameness, which later resolved itself into a hundred variations of green. There were cows everywhere, velvety black or black and white, lying down or grazing, all prosperous-looking and placid—like their owners. There were windmills turning lazily, and clustered villages in the distance, with sedate church spires rooted to earth. There were men and women working, so much a part of the countryside, with the slow, steady rhythm of their labour, that even the flocks of birds took no notice of them. A pageant of high cloud swept across the arch of the sky, and immeasurably beneath it the barge crawled silently along over the green waters of the canal. Life here was as quiet as if these pastures still formed the sea-bottom; and, if the dikes suddenly burst and the sea-water swept over the land, Adriaen could imagine the cows and the people adapting

themselves instinctively to the aimless, cold-blooded existence of fish.

His eyes closed, and he began speculating about the man Hals. . . .

Haarlem seemed a pleasant, welcoming little town, as Adriaen stepped ashore, with dull red brick houses, the façades of which rose in steps to a peak in the centre. The streets were narrow and intimate, and bunched themselves up every few yards in bridges over the canals. He inquired the whereabouts of Frans Hals.

'He will be at the tavern at this hour of the evening,' someone told him, 'unless he has been suddenly stricken dead.'

'H'm. Then we shall certainly like each other,' Adriaen answered. 'Where is this tavern?'

The man walked with him there, and they entered the usual bare, dingy room. Frans Hals was pointed out. Adriaen called for brandy and paper. For a few minutes he drank and watched the noisy group of sycophants round Hals. Then he began to draw, with the landlord looking over his shoulder. He drew a bull-like head, tilted back, with thrusting beard suggesting an enormous paint brush, exaggerated moustaches, open, gross-lipped, laughing mouth, and eyes half closed. He hinted at a florid complexion, a hat like a drunken halo, and a raised pint-pot. He surrounded the sketch with fat clouds supported by a couple of robust cherubim, and labelled it 'The Apotheosis of St. Frans.'

When he had finished the landlord slapped him on the back and shouted across the room: 'Frans, Frans, here is a young fellow has drawn you to the life!'

Hals looked curiously at Adriaen over the top of his tankard, and beckoned him with his head. Adriaen handed him the sketch with a mock bow. He frowned

at it for a moment, then burst into a loud guffaw. His bleary eyes looked it greedily over.

'It is good!' he exclaimed at length in a deep, succulent voice. 'Who the devil are you?'

'A poor nobody with a lust to paint—name of Brouwer.'

'I can see no reason why you should not paint.'

'Can you see any reason why you should not teach me?'

'Well! You have the impudence of Satan! I am over-pupilled already.'

'Then just one more won't make any difference. You are the best painter in Christendom, and I intend to learn from you to be better. My wants are few, I love drinking, and I can make you laugh. Let us have some brandy to celebrate the bargain. Here, host!'

'Devil take it! Are you aware, young man, that people from all over Holland and Flanders come to . . .'

'D' you know that story about the priest and the two nuns in a snowstorm? Well, the priest was going along the road between . . .'

A few hours later Adriaen helped some of his future fellow-pupils to carry home his future master and put him to bed. And not for the last time.

CHAPTER VI

PORTRAIT OF A PAINTER

I

ADRIAEN had finished his drawing. He sat cross-legged on his stool, gazing round at the ten other pupils of Frans Hals, all scribbling busily. His eyes were tired and his brain was tired. He had been drawing all day, and he was longing to get to his own picture before the light finally went. It was already dim in this great barn of a room. Heavy clouds swept by outside, and bundles of rain were blown against the windows. The model, exaggeratedly naked with his heavy beard, huge hairy chest, and ridiculous little girdle, kept flagging from his position. All he needed, Adriaen thought, was a few well-placed arrows and a background of modern architecture and blue sky to make a very passable St. Sebastian.

Adriaen was bored with all this drawing from life, though he supposed that it was good for him. He wanted to work at his own picture, and he instinctively disliked anything that was good for him. Yet Hals, on his rare visits to their studio, had a way of inspiring.

When he remembered his pupils, Hals would come shuffling rapidly in like a great uncouth bear, with smears of paint on his hands and his expensive clothes—for he liked to cut a dash in Haarlem—and pay a thunderstorm visit of perhaps two minutes to each of them. He would snatch their drawing and hold it up to the light, his eyes pouncing at every detail, his mouth tight shut,

breathing heavily through his nose. Then his eyes would flicker from drawing to model, and he would either give it back with a grunt, which meant that it wasn't very bad, or he would roar: 'Look at the man's belly muscles, lad!' or just crumple up the paper and throw it into a corner. Very rarely he would seize the charcoal, make a swift enlarged sketch of some part which was wrongly drawn, and throw back the charcoal so that it snapped in half. However, it was all much more interesting than the mythological figures at the tapestry works.

Adriaen Van Ostade, on his left, leaned across to look at Adriaen's drawing.

'Yes,' he whispered, after a moment. 'It's good. I wish I could draw like you, Adriaen.' He gazed up with earnest eyes, set painfully close together in a spiritless face, which was covered in unexpected places with a short growth of prickly black hairs. He looked benign, but moth-eaten.

'You persevere, my lad, and you 'll succeed one day,' Adriaen laughed loudly.

Those near him turned to frown.

'O God! I always forget to behave in this studio as in a cathedral. We ought to have some incense burning in front of the model, eh?'

'Adriaen, what things you say!' Van Ostade looked shocked and then laughed.

Adriaen stood up and stretched, and his drawing fell to the ground. Van Ostade picked it up, smudging it along the floor. His large mouth opened in horror.

'The devil! Look what I 've done!'

Adriaen laughed and smacked him on the back.

'Poor old Van Ostade—always making a fool of yourself! Never mind—it wasn't one of my best.'

I'm tired of this. I'm going to have a look at my picture.'

'Oh, but the master hasn't dismissed us yet.'

'I don't mind. He's probably forgotten all about us.'

'Oh, go!' said the youth on his other side; 'for the love of God, go, if you're going, and don't disturb those who want to work!'

Adriaen turned to find another pair of eyes fixed on him, darkly shadowed with dislike. He leaned forward to look at the drawing at which the youth's pudgy mauve fingers scrawled laboriously.

'No wonder you feel peevish, Kervyn!' he murmured, and walked out into Hals's own studio.

It was empty. Palette, rags, brushes, and paints lay jumbled on a table. On the easel stood the glowing half-finished canvas of Kervyn Van der Branck's over-dressed little brother and sister, prancing merrily through a rather formal garden. The dough-like faces of the children were enlivened with shouted laughter, and the highly-decorated goat with which they were playing was almost a Pan. Adriaen knew the picture nearly as well as his own. He had watched it grow from its first thick, confused under-painting, mixed the colours for it, and painted less important parts himself. But he could not help standing and admiring in the bad light. Hals had somehow combined a hundred moments of clumsy, selfishly unself-conscious gambollings into one eternal, characteristic moment. What a miserable pity that these two little Van der Brancks had to grow into unappetizing, spotty likenesses of their elder brother Kervyn, with his petty airs and stupid jealousies! They were delightful now, or had been at this Hals-interpreted moment. Adriaen always wondered that

such a sensuous, passionate egotist as Hals could fix on canvas with swift sureness of touch the essentials of any personality at any one given moment, as expressed in flesh and blood and clothes. He thought of his own little picture upstairs in his attic, of some peasants quarrelling at cards, of his sombre treatment of the subject, the caricatured posture of one of the figures rather like Jabbeke, the muddied colouring in the drapery, and he turned with the determination of running a palette knife through the thing.

Just then Hals's wife came in, holding little Sara by the hand—a plain, unsmiling child, who hid her face in the thick scarlet folds of her mother's skirt whenever Adriaen made a comic face for her benefit. An unlikely child for him, he always told Hals, but then what could you expect with a lapse of only twelve days between his marriage and Sara's birth? He made an exaggeratedly low bow.

'Well, Mevrouw Hals?'

'Well, Adriaen? And why are you not working?'

'Where is your master and mine?'

'He could not get the effect he wanted for a dimple in one of those children's cheeks, so he sent for Sara, but she would neither smile nor keep still, so he bellowed at her and rushed off through the rain to the tavern. He 'll be soaked, poor man. And meanwhile, I 've been consoling this child.'

Adriaen burst out laughing.

'And meanwhile, we poor devils of pupils have been drawing away in semi-darkness. Your father, Sara, is a great, big, wicked man.'

He jumped down on to all fours and slowly stalked Sara, barking like a dog. Sara burst into tears and hid her face in her mother's skirt.

'Oh, curse you, Adriaen! Now I shall have to start all over again!'

Adriaen got up.

'You know, I'm afraid, Lysbeth, that your daughter doesn't really appreciate me. Not like her mother.'

Taking advantage of her occupation in stroking Sara's flaxen head, he crept forward to kiss Lysbeth's pink cheek with burlesque loudness. She straightened up, her roguish red mouth in a pout, her fine curved eyebrows frowning, her merry brown eyes belying her outraged dignity.

'How dare you, Adriaen!' she cried, pushing a wisp of dark hair under her not very clean lace cap. 'I shall tell my husband!'

'And he will beat you to death like his first wife!'

'No, he won't! He never beats me. And he only beat her because she bored him and he was drunk. He's devoted to me.'

'Ah, yes. He's a model husband!' Adriaen laughed.

'And I'm a model wife.'

'Only because you daren't be anything else.'

'Oh, I've no time to stay arguing with you. You go and bring my husband home from the tavern. He's always in there since you came.'

'Then I'm the worst person to send to bring him home. But it's a good idea, nevertheless, rain or no rain. Lend me a guilder?'

'Certainly not!'

'Oh, Lysbeth! I'll give you another kiss if you do.'

She stamped her foot.

'Certainly not, indeed!'

'I'll give you another kiss if you don't!'

He laid a hand on her shoulder and laughed into her face.

'Adriaen! Let go! How dare you!'

He darted a kiss at her face and she smacked at his. Both missed. Adriaen laughed again.

'Then I'll have to borrow off your husband. Farewell, Mevrouw Hals!'

He bowed low and went through into the pupils' studio.

'Go on, all of you, get out now!' he bellowed in excellent imitation of Hals's voice.

The class broke up wearily.

II

They all stood round the easel, admiring, but not quite knowing what to say—Mijnheer and Mevrouw Van der Branck, Kervyn Van der Branck, his sister Cornelia—with Lysbeth Hals watching amused, hands folded against her rotund, bright blue stomach. Frans sprawled in a chair with his clothes open about his big red neck, chewing the end of a brush and sighing. He had a headache from the night before, and a feeling that the Van der Brancks were going to be obstinate over his price. Old Van der Branck was notoriously stingy, and Adriaen, who had been finishing off the foreground when they arrived, and had been immediately pushed aside as both superfluous and unpresentable, stood by the fire looking forward to some brisk bargaining between this scrawny little linen merchant and his own close-fisted master.

Kervyn Van der Branck was showing off the picture and his own knowledge of painting to his parents, with much waving of pudgy hands and a grating voice. His father was listening with mixed interest, pride in his son, and gratitude that he was getting his money's

worth both out of the picture and Kervyn's lessons, while twiddling his greyish blade of a beard. His wife was ogling her children's portrait with a contented, milky smile on her mottled expanse of face. Lysbeth was watching Hals anxiously, frightened lest his boorish manners and miserliness might kill the bargain altogether—and she badly needed the money.

Frans glowered at his customers, and they started haggling. Adriaen went nearer not to lose a word. Van der Branck casually mentioned the price originally agreed upon. Hals threw back his head and gave a shout of discordant laughter, until a twinge silenced him. Lysbeth frowned and clucked her tongue. Cornelia Van der Branck took the opportunity of the general preoccupation to edge nearer to Adriaen. He noticed the perfume and looked round. She smiled at him. Her smile was as generous as her mouth. Her nose curled deliciously in the opposite direction to her father's, but her face was hard and sensual. What he could see of her hair beneath her father's best linen was a crisp, ruddy gold. The freckles on her goldly-soft skin were clearly her chief worry in life.

'You 're the first woman I 've met,' he said, 'who smelt nice.'

'Am I?' she said, studying him.

'Yes; God be thanked. Moreover, you 're the first woman I 've seen really worth looking at. I 'd like to paint you. But aren't you a little bold, talking to me like this? If Mevrouw saw you, now?'

Her eyes, almost colourless, swam round to her mother, who was still complacently leering at the picture. She shrugged her shoulders, and her eyes swam back again to study him.

'And who are you?' she asked.

'A poor lousy painter.'

'Your language befits your appearance.'

'It does.'

Adriaen smiled, and there was silence into which broke Hals's booming voice:

'. . . It took me a week to paint in the flowers on the children's clothes alone. . . .'

Adriaen could not help chuckling. He and Van Ostade had done them in a morning. Lysbeth glared at him.

'I cannot help it,' Van der Branck interrupted, cold and firm. 'You agreed upon a sum of—'

'Where would you find another painter in this world,' Hals shouted back, 'to make their portrait with such wonderful likeness? Ravesteyn? Miereveldt? God's love! They'd have charged three times my price and given you a couple of lukewarm fish. . . .'

Adriaen chuckled again. But Cornelia was apparently asking him a question.

'What did you say?'

'I was asking, only you won't listen to me, what sort of pictures you paint?'

'Coarse, earthy pictures.'

'Because you are a coarse, earthy man?'

'Yes, thank God! I am one of the poor. I love them—contemptible idiots though they are—so I paint them.'

'I would like to see something of yours.'

'No, you wouldn't. It would probably shock you. The sort of life I live would make you retch.'

'But I am a woman like other women.'

'Like other women of your wealth—yes. That is to say, a very charming doll.'

'You are exceedingly rude!'

She turned pouting away. Adriaen smiled. For some reason he enjoyed being rude to this girl. Then he realized that Lysbeth was now taking part in the main argument, with a thrust-and-parry cunning far more effective than the battle-axe methods of her husband.

'... Frans has made himself ill working long hours at the picture,' she lied; 'and you can imagine, Mevrouw Van der Branck, that I do not want a sick husband on my hands, as well as all my children and the apprentices.'

Van der Branck turned on his wife before she had had time to answer.

'I forbid you to say a word, wife. This is no woman's affair, and I don't know why Mevrouw Hals is mixing herself up in it. I have your bond, Hals, which clearly states that . . .'

Adriaen slipped out of the room, and up to the little attic under the roof which he had to share with Van Ostade. On a rough easel, which he had put together out of odd bits of wood begged from the timber yard near by, was the little picture he had just finished. Van Ostade was seated on the bottom of a sawn-off barrel, studying it intently.

'Adriaen,' he began at once, 'I have decided to do a tavern impression like yours.'

'Yes,' said Adriaen, 'you would! But, forgive me, I think I may have a buyer. . . .'

He snatched the picture off its easel and ran out, leaving Van Ostade staring after him.

When he reached the studio, rising anger had swept Hals on to his feet. He had thrust out an angry red face at Van der Branck, and was emphasizing his

arguments with a waggling brush. The others were gaping at him.

'... My wife, here, has suggested a reasonable compromise between your ridiculous price and mine. If you care to pay it, here and now, the picture is yours. If not . . .'

'Do be sensible, father!' Kervyn urged.

'Hold your tongue, son! I refuse utterly!' Van der Branck was at his coldest and most obstinately pompous, and Adriaen guessed that he was wavering. 'As a Christian and a magistrate, I insist . . .'

'Jesu!' Hals cried. 'Was there ever such a fool!' He swung round, rather unsteadily, seized up a palette knife from the table behind him, and went for his canvas.

'No!' yelled Lysbeth, Kervyn, and Adriaen, rushing forward.

But Mevrouw Van der Branck, the mother thrusting aside the middle-class matron, gave one shriek and flew at Hals, seizing his wrist with both hands and tugging wildly to drag him away from this blasphemous infanticide.

'The massacre of the innocents prevented!' Adriaen shouted. 'Well fought, Mother Van der Branck!'

Lysbeth joined in the fight, trying to make her arm meet round her husband's stomach, until she received a kick over the shin from his heel, which sent her hobbling and moaning out of the room. Kervyn caught hold of Hals's other arm. Van der Branck fidgeted nervously with a silver button, ashamed of his wife's sudden and incomprehensible lack of dignity, fearful for his own, embarrassed at the naked violence of the scene. Frans struggled rather half-heartedly, headache and the fear of finally offending customers

combining to set bounds to his temper. Sweat stood out on his face, and saliva dribbled on to his beard.

'You must pay him his price!' Mevrouw Van der Branck shrieked at her husband. 'Pay him, or he will tear my little ones!'

'Pay him!' shouted Kervyn.

'Pay me!' shouted Hals, 'or I'll rip the whole thing up!'

'Don't pay him!' shouted Adriaen, hoping to prolong the scene.

Van der Branck tugged at the silver button and licked his lips.

Hals gave a great wrench, tore his wrist away from Mevrouw Van der Branck, leaving bits of skin in her nails, and brandished the palette knife at the picture. She yelled. Her husband said swiftly: 'Oh, very well, then.'

Mevrouw Van der Branck flopped into Hals's chair and closed her eyes, her immense bosom heaving. Kervyn went to her, surprising Adriaen by the gentleness with which he soothed her. Van der Branck took a purse from his belt and started counting the coins out on to the table. Hals watched greedily, holding his wrist, puffing and blowing, occasionally picking up a guilder to bite it with strong yellow teeth.

Adriaen approached Cornelia. She was almost in tears.

'That was fun, wasn't it?' he said.

'It was horrible! My mother . . . I—I'm ashamed of her!'

'Why? You'll be just the same with your own brats. Now, here's my picture.'

Her eyes swam round to him as he held it with both hands in front of his chest. She looked at it for some moments.

'It's ugly, but rather fascinating.'

'So is life.'

'I don't like it.'

'Want to buy it?'

'Oh, no!'

'Would your father?'

She looked at him, her eyes narrowing. Then she smiled and turned towards Van der Branck.

'Father, would you like to buy another picture—for me—from this—this gentleman?'

Her father looked up from the paper he was signing. He looked at Adriaen, and then at the picture, and then at Adriaen again.

'No!'

'Then I shall burn it,' said Adriaen, walking towards the hearth.

'Oh, no, no!' Cornelius hastened after him. 'You mustn't burn it!'

Adriaen laughed, and held the picture out towards the flames.

'Then buy it!'

'I can't. I have no money. Give it me, and I'll persuade my father. . . . Father, you must buy this picture!'

'No, indeed!'

'Then it's going into the fire.' Adriaen held a corner to the flames, and the oil paint bubbled, sending out an acrid smell.

'Oh, please!' She clutched at his arm.

He laughed and dropped the canvas into the fire, where it flared up. Cornelius burst into tears, holding

plump fingers in front of her face. On one of them was a ring with a deep blue stone, in which Adriaen could see the minute dancing reflection of the flames.

'I like your hands,' he murmured.

'I hate you!' she sobbed.

'The best place for that daub,' sneered Kervyn, who had calmed his mother and was now coming to see what was wrong with his sister.

'Yes. You are perfectly right,' said Adriaen.

But Van der Branck was gathering together his harassed family.

'Henceforward,' he was saying, 'I'll have nothing more to do with this — this household of lunatics! Come, Cornelia. Kervyn, your studies here cease from this moment.'

'But, father . . .'

'Bring your mother.'

Adriaen bowed low as the Van der Branck family left the room, the males supporting two overcome females.

Hals threw himself into his chair with a bellow of laughter.

'We came out of that very prettily! Except for my wrist—that hell-cat! The girl was worth looking at twice, eh, Adriaen?'

'I hoped she might buy my picture.'

'Well, she didn't, and you've lost it. It doesn't pay to try the same trick twice.'

'It was a bad picture, anyhow.'

'I deceived them nicely with my little palette-knife comedy.'

'Comedy, Frans?' Adriaen smiled doubtfully. 'Well, you've got fifty guilders more for your picture than

you deserved. What about just the smallest drop of brandy ?'

'Good!' Hals roared, and stood up. And putting his arm round Adriaen's neck, they marched out of the house.

III

Frans Hals in liquor was either maudlin—petulant self-pity sitting as incongruously on his gross bulk as would a lady's lace cap on his bald head—or aggressive to the point of whipping out his little jewelled dagger. That afternoon he had told a moderately truthful version of the sale of the Van der Branck picture, continuing logically with a eulogy of his own gifts, and working up to a ferocious challenge to any of his sycophants to prove that he was not the best painter in the country. At this point the dagger duly flashed out, and was stuck into the table in front of him. Then the results of last night's orgy combined with to-day's drinking induced the other mood, and he was pointing out with tears in his eyes and Rhenish on his beard the injustice of the superior popularity of such paltry artists as Miereveldt and Ravesteyn.

Adriaen had heard it all so often that he moved to another table, avoiding Van Ostade, who was quietly sozzling in a corner, called for pipe and tobacco bowl, lit up, and started a sketch of one of Hals's listeners—an old farmer with earth-coloured rags, a snout of a nose, and a flabby hat crammed down over his eyes to obliterate such personality as he had.

The pipe was repellent at first—Adriaen could never get used to those initial puffs—but he kept at it, and Hals's gruffly peevish voice became gradually more

indistinct and unrelated, floating windily about the little room like the smoke from his pipe. His crayon, drawing of its own volition, widened the old farmer's nose until it was that of a goat. It pierced his hat with horns and decorated it with flowers. It ended off his stumpy legs with hair and hoofs, and gave him a tail. A hot feeling grew in Adriaen's throat and chest, till they were pleasantly on fire. The goat-farmer began a deep bleating, which re-echoed thunderously round and round Adriaen's stomach, rumbling its way upwards to roar in his head. The room and its details dissolved into an arabesque of changing, whirling shapes. Living and the world seemed reduced to a fiery chaos, which was frightening, until everything resolidified in the identity of one Adriaen Brouwer, once a poor lousy painter, now a goat-man decorated with exquisite flowers which scented the heavens with unholy delicacy. He was bounding, this goat-man, across flat Holland, leaping the shiny canals, the grass smouldering beneath him when he put hoof to ground, the air crackling as it divided before his lightning onrush. A song of the fiery earth burst from his lips as he went, and spread out fan-wise behind him in white-hot sound. And ever before him, like a comet, went the nymph with the goldly-soft skin and swimming, almost colourless eyes, whose streaming hair was a sheet of flame. He would catch her soon enough, after which the world would be repeopled with worshippers of earth and fire. Meanwhile, singing swift pursuit was a miracle of anticipation.

The years passed. The dikes burst, and flat Holland was once again the sea-bed, above which darted shoals of tiny silver fishes to devour by slow generations the corpses of the earth and fire worshippers. Above them,

the waters were frozen, and over the silent surface he drew slowly nearer and nearer the glowing nymph, who glanced back from time to time with frightened, swimming, colourless eyes, while the ice sizzled and thawed beneath their flying feet, and the moon strove to keep pace with them. . . .

CHAPTER VII

PORTRAIT OF A SERVANT TURNED HOST

I

ADRIAEN wished that they wouldn't crowd round him. He liked to be alone when he worked. There was Van Ostade, of course, studying his methods as if he were already a famous master, occasionally jogging his easel, and then opening his large mouth in horror, too overcome to apologize. Lysbeth had stopped on her way to market, basket over arm. Dirk Hals, Frans's younger brother, sat near by with a pipe of refined tobacco, the smoke from which kept drifting into Adriaen's eyes. He was a contrast to Frans—so much smaller in every way. Adriaen had privately caricatured him for Lysbeth's benefit as a peevish skeleton, with oily black hair brushed straight off his forehead, long black side-whiskers, neat, clerkly black cloth, spotless linen, wrinkled stockings, and enormous black feet. Lysbeth, who thought him a prig, had giggled richly. Frans had taught him to paint, but he wasted his comparatively small share of the family talent, oddly enough, over pretty canvases of gay society life.

Adriaen looked down at his brushful of yellow paint —like the pregnant bud of a spring flower.

'Yes,' Lysbeth murmured. 'It looks pleasant like that. It seems a pity to use it.'

'You are mistaken, Mevrouw,' Van Ostade disagreed earnestly. 'You will see what lovely use of it Adriaen will make.'

'It is going to underpaint this dolt's ugly jowl,' Adriaen said.

'Ah, but the way Adriaen seizes an expression and puts it on to canvas . . .'

'Which he hasn't paid for.'

'The painter,' Dirk started off in his monotonous voice, with little wet smackings of his lips, 'should aim at the spiritual . . .'

Adriaen laughed. 'That sounds well from you, Dirk! Would you say your husband was a spiritual fellow, Lysbeth?'

'No, he 's certainly not that.'

'And nor are you!'

'I say my prayers each night! So does Frans, for that matter, when he 's sober.'

'A charming sight—Frans and Lysbeth side by side on their knees, hands lifted in prayer, and the brandy bottle under the bed!'

'Oh, Adriaen, don't mock at them!' Van Ostade was horrified again.

'Cheer up, Ostade!' Adriaen neatly flicked a splodge of bright blue paint on to the end of his nose. Even Dirk's pale mouth curved slightly upwards, and Van Ostade laughed genuinely as he wiped it off.

'I cannot think why any of you want to be painters,' said Lysbeth. 'How I wish my husband was a successful merchant with a steady income!'

'But he 's a highly successful painter,' Van Ostade said.

At that moment there was a din of slamming doors and heavy feet along the tiled corridor outside.

'Here he is, anyway,' said Adriaen. 'And the income is unusually steady.'

Hals threw open the door. His face was glowing above his ruff like an apple on a junket.

'Jesu!' he exclaimed, 'but it's cold outside!'

He threw his cloak and hat on to the floor—Lysbeth with a frown went to hang them up—and came towards the group, rubbing his hands together. He had been followed in by a vast man, whose merry face seemed all cheeks and chins, and whose clothes stretched ominously as he bent with elephantine gallantry over Lysbeth's hand.

'Neighbour Roelandts has news for us,' Hals announced, blocking out the fire from the rest of the room.

'Yes, Mevrouw' — Roelandts's voice when it had struggled up through his chins was remarkably small and mild—'you know the Truce ends to-day?'

'Truce? What Truce?'

'Why, the Twelve Years' Truce with Spain.'

'God on high! Does that mean a beginning of persecution and torture and fighting all over again?'

'Have no fear. The fighting will not spread as far north as this. We are uniformly Calvinist up here, and the Spaniards can't touch us.'

I wonder what religion father is now? Adriaen thought.

'He's left the best bit of news till last,' said Hals. 'For, to celebrate the occasion, the St. Joris civic guards are holding a banquet in the Stadhuis to-night.'

'Oh, only that!' said Lysbeth.

'The Stadholder is to take the field at once,' Roelandts continued, 'and I hear that the Spanish king has sent Spinola into these parts.'

'Spinola is a great general,' said Dirk lugubriously.

'Dirk,' Hals shouted across the room, 'you will dine with me at the banquet as my guest!'

'Oh, but . . .'

'Nonsense!' Roelandts clapped him heavily on the back, so that he blinked and wriggled his shoulder-blades. 'We 'll take no "Oh, buts," eh, Hals ?'

'Certainly not. And we 'll rouse up this dozy old town!'

The thought of Dirk rousing up the dozy old town decided Adriaen.

'Take me as your guest, too, Frans ?' he asked.

'You! Why, you 're a guttersnipe, and we 're respectable and worthy citizens and pretty archers, eh, Roelandts ?'

'Yes, indeed!'

'Besides, we can only take one guest each.'

'Well, I 'll wager ten guilders I 'll attend your banquet, and drink your health.'

'You! You haven't got ten guilders and never will have.'

'I shall by to-night. Come, Frans, is that a bet ?'

'If you win, I pay, and if I win, you don't, eh ? Oh, very well, then. Roelandts, you can be witness. Now let 's see what you 're working at.'

Hals strode over from the hearth, and glared at Adriaen's picture.

'H'm,' he growled at length; 'yes, it 's quite promising.'

'Oh, but, master,' Van Ostade butted in, as Adriaen hoped he would. 'It 's good! Look at this line. . . .'

'Ho! you 're here, are you! Well, no one asked for your ridiculous opinion. I could point out a thousand faults if I wanted. I repeat—it has promise—what d' you say, Roelandts ?'

Roelandts chortled fatuously.

'Don't ask me. I know nothing of such matters.'

'Well, your opinion, Dirk ?'

'It has qualities, Frans, which your work lacks.'

'What? You can say that! You, to whom I freely gave all my knowledge and experience! You—you young upstart!'

The idea of Dirk as a 'young upstart' made Adriaen laugh, but Lysbeth said:

'Don't be ridiculous, Frans. You asked his opinion.'

'Silence, woman! Go—go and scrub something!'

'Dirk has not yet shown us how my work is superior to yours,' said Adriaen mischievously.

'Huh! Let him try!'

'You 're jealous, Frans!' Adriaen meant it as a joke, but Hals's face went purpler than usual, and he suddenly aimed an enormous kick. Adriaen dodged, and Frans came lumberingly after him.

'Remember our bet!' Adriaen shouted as he ran through the door.

II

It was a bitterly cold night and the sky seemed congested as Adriaen walked towards the Stadhuis. He was devilishly hungry, for he had not dared return to the house. He had no idea of how he was going to get into the Stadhuis, though he knew well enough how he was going to spend the ten guilders, if he ever managed to screw them out of Frans. He would buy some proper ochres, chromes, venetian red, ultramarine, siennas, white lead, and linseed oil, and be able to grind himself pure colours, and not have to make shift with Hals's cast-offs. He would buy stuffs for draperies, a lay figure, some poetry, and a mandolin—by which time he would have greatly exceeded the ten guilders.

He came out into the broad Groote Markt. The dark

mass of the Groote Kerk towered to his left, the low compact Stadhuis was on his right, with shafts of light from its small windows shining faintly on the doltish faces of loafers, who, even on this cold night, were hanging about, trying to peer in and enrich a turgid life with a little vicarious enjoyment. He prowled round its blank outside, trying to find a suitable window to climb in. A man crossed the street a little way in front of him and disappeared into the Stadhuis through a door which Adriaen had not noticed in the darkness. He hastened after him. The man stopped and peered.

'You 're late,' he said.

'Yes,' Adriaen answered; 'I was delayed.'

'You 'll have to hurry. They 'll be beginning in ten minutes. Follow me.'

This was luck. It was making it almost too easy. Adriaen wondered who he was supposed to be. The man led him through dark passages, and eventually they turned into a wider corridor, down some stone steps, dimly lit with torches, and into a huge, high kitchen, filled with hot, worried, hustling men. There was a delicious, tantalizing smell of cooking. From the vaulted ceiling hung festoons of onions, strings of sausages, haunches of meat. There were two huge fires with half a carcass turning in front of each, and scullions buzzing round them. Fish and vegetables lolled in buckets of clean water. On the tables were platters of opened oysters, dishes of jellies and cream, snails, sweetmeats, and a gross turkey stuffed with sausage-meat, truffles, dates, and raisins. The saliva dripped from Adriaen's tongue.

The man looked him up and down disapprovingly.

'I suppose you 're the fellow from de Zeven's?' he said doubtfully.

'I suppose so.'

'Well, you 're a disgusting sight. However, they 'll soon be too drunk to notice anything. And your apron will cover up a lot. You 'll find one over there.'

He nodded to a corner where men were making themselves ready. Adriaen took an apron from a hook and tied it round himself. It would be maddening to hand round dishes with his own stomach shrieking for food. Succulent roasted birds were already leaving the kitchen. He watched them go enviously, and thought of Frans's great chewing mouth and the shining slobbers of grease on his beard. He wandered vaguely towards one of the fires, where a cook was busy carving ducks. He felt a touch on his shoulder. The man who had led him in was again looking at him critically.

'De Zeven's man is here. Who are you?'

Adriaen assumed an expression of Flemish stolidity.

'I was sent,' he answered.

'H'mph! Must have been some mistake. Well, I dare say you 'll come in useful. You 'd better wait here till you 're wanted. You can go when the banquet 's finished. And be sure to be round for clearing up at six to-morrow morning.'

Adriaen nodded. A bell rang outside, the man shouted orders, and every one began to rush chaotically round.

Adriaen turned to watch the cook. He looked up and grinned.

'Like a wing?' he asked.

Adriaen nodded and stretched out a hand. The cook looked round quickly, neatly sliced off a hunk of meat, and handed it to Adriaen, who began wolfing it. The cook went on with his carving, while Adriaen watched his fascinating efficiency, reminded of Baudouin. Sweat

dripped down the cook's placid egg face, down his bare white muscular arms, and glittered on the top of his bald head.

'My wife always used to like a wing,' he announced suddenly.

'Her taste was good,' Adriaen answered.

'She was a rare one to cook and preserve and brew ale. I miss her stews, and her cheerful smack of the lips when she tasted from the pot. Our home hasn't been the same since she went. She kept it like—that knife there.' He pointed to a glistening carving-knife. 'Went off with a baker's apprentice to Amsterdam. Handsome young fellow he was—she always knew a good thing. Said I brought her ill luck. They're very happy, I believe, God be thanked! That was two years ago now.'

Adriaen threw his bone into the fire. The cook looked round, sliced off another bit, and silently handed it to him.

'Thank you.'

'Hungry, aren't you? You've got that look. . . . Yes; our eldest girl fell into a canal and was drowned. We were very sorry to lose her. She was so like her mother—always cheerful. Then another one was still-born. The wife hadn't been well, you know. No wonder she wanted a change. A change does every one good, don't you think? Of course it's lonely, but then I've always got my cooking. To turn a dish out just perfectly—there's no joy like it!'

'Yes. I can understand that.'

'Hi—you eating there!' Adriaen heard a shout and turned. 'Come away with you, and bring some of those oysters in!'

Adriaen wiped his mouth with his hand, jumped

up, seized a dish, and followed at the end of the procession.

Then things moved with a rush. Adriaen ran to and from the kitchen with platters of oysters, which were emptied immediately they had been put before the diners. He had vague impressions of the dinner table as a central island of light in a sea of rich gloom, through which swam the dim figures of the attendants; of pale yellow, blue, pink sashes, and starched white ruffs, against a background of opulent blacks and browns; of glints of light from tilted, misty green glasses; of boastful beards and militant moustaches moving around great goblets of food; of red healthy flesh, and lounging, complacent bodies; of shouted scandal followed by coarse bellows of laughter.

The din increased. Bellies were becoming glutted, minds were beginning to seethe, speech to thicken. A man threw an oyster-shell and hit an attendant on the head. A trickle of blood wormed down his forehead. This was considered a good game, and Adriaen and the rest had to hold their platters in front of their faces as they hurried from the room for fresh supplies. However, a worse shot than usual shattered a flagon of wine over its bearer, cutting his hands and cheek with the flying glass. This was deprecated as a waste of good wine, so a chorus was started in deafening discord, the rhythm being thumped on the table with fists and glasses.

Adriaen stood back in the shadow to watch. There was Hals, with purple, heated face, conducting the song with his dagger and trying to out-bawl every one; not yet drunk enough to have forgotten the importance of impressing these men of a higher social standing than himself. On one side of him Roelandts lay back in his chair with his eyes shut, singing out of tune, his chins

rippling ruddily over his white ruff. On the other side, Dirk was taking spasmodic sips from his glass, looking nervously round at all these blatantly self-satisfied roisterers, and occasionally giggling to himself. To Adriaen, cold sober for once, Dirk was the most repulsive sight of them all.

These men would certainly be perfect subjects for Frans's brush, Adriaen thought, though he would not see through their self-important childishness—probably because he aspired to be like them. In spite of his genius, he would just as soon be Frans Hals, mayor of Haarlem, as Frans Hals the painter. He realized that they only accepted him as Hals the good fellow, and in their company he had not the courage of his talent. For these archers, the respected citizens of Haarlem, behaved, when their defences were down, exactly like the 'Urchins' of Oudenaarde. They looked ridiculous now. They felt like gods and looked like the boors they really were, in spite of their superficial finery—all except Dirk, who looked like a grave giggling puppet, jerking on a string. And what a much pleasanter fellow than any of them was the cook who had delighted in the preparation of their food!

Pipes were handed round. Glasses were filled and refilled. The songs became coarser and lost what wit they had had. Snoring heads were laid on the table. Wine was poured over them. And Dirk Hals suddenly slithered under the table, as neatly and quietly as a stone placed on the surface of water. Frans had his arm round Roelandts's neck and was telling a long and involved story about himself, to which Roelandts listened with solemn, baby face, puckered in the effort to follow, nodding portentously when he did so. Dirk's other neighbour was asleep. No one had noticed his

disappearance. Adriaen looked round, and then crept on all fours, past Dirk's chair, under the table.

The din was curiously subdued down here. Dirk lay in a snoring heap on the floor. Adriaen was surrounded by sprawling, coloured, silken legs, fat and thin, and boots of every shape known to male effeminacy. He was tempted to jam a fork into some of the more rotund calves, or tie together pairs of differently owned legs. But he was working to another plan. He rolled Dirk over, took off his black cloth jacket and ruff, and squeezed himself into them, putting his own rags on Dirk. Then he peeped out cautiously. The position of his neighbours was unaltered. He glided slowly up, seated himself in Dirk's chair, and reached for the wine. In a short time, he thought, I shall be exactly like the rest of them. He drank off several glasses and felt better. A man on the other side of the table was staring. Adriaen smiled at him, rapped loudly on the table, and stood up.

'Gentlemen!' he yelled above the clatter. 'Gentlemen! I propose this toast—Damnation to the Spaniards, and health to the greatest painter in Holland!' Then he turned and nudged Frans, who looked angrily round, gaped, and then guffawed.

Those who had heard Adriaen stood up with difficulty to drink the toast.

'Now then!' he shouted again. 'What d' you say to rousing up Haarlem?'

The shout was echoed everywhere, and those who could tottered from the room. In a few moments only guttering candles, half-empty plates and flagons, overturned chairs, a thick smell, and hoggish sleepers remained.

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The bonfire flung leaping shadows across the cobbles of the Groote Markt and up the stately walls of the Groote Kerk. Shutters had been wrenched off houses; furniture, torches, candles, cushions, curtains had been rushed from the Stadhuis to feed the flames. Shouted protests came from opened windows and the gathering crowd. Round the fire danced and bellowed the dignified members of the respected civic corps of the Archers of St. Joris, except for those who lay unconscious on the ground. And great flakes of snow fell silently upon everything, appearing suddenly out of the upper darkness, vanishing as soon as they touched anything solid, or disappearing with a tiny hiss into the flames. In a few hours' time, Adriaen reflected, the fire would be burned to ashes and covered with snow, the square would be empty and cold, and the rioters suffering from headaches.

He felt a hand on his elbow. Bleary eyes in a gaunt bearded face looked dimly into his.

'Have you a stiver, young sir, for a poor old man?'

Adriaen laughed. He had forgotten that he must look something like a gentleman in Dirk's clothes. He thought for a moment—then said: 'Follow me.'

He walked round the Groote Markt several times, and finally reached the main door of the Stadhuis with a following of a dozen ragged creatures. It was locked. He knocked loudly and often, while the scarecrows he had collected shivered fatalistically behind him. At last the door opened, and a sleepy face appeared. 'What d' you want?' it demanded angrily. Adriaen thrust his foot in the door, and assumed a patrician voice.

'The mayor demands immediate entrance for himself and the corps of archers.'

The door opened at once. Adriaen seized the caretaker by the arms and shouted to his 'archers' to enter. They shambled in, and he directed the last to lock the door, and precede him with the candle which the caretaker had put down.

'Follow me,' he ordered, and led the way to the banqueting hall, stopping only to push the caretaker into an empty council chamber and turn the key on him. He lit the few remaining candle-ends above the remnants of the feast.

'Sit down and help yourselves,' he said.

The beggars stood and stared.

'Here is plenty of food and wine,' he repeated. 'Help yourselves, you fools! You won't have another chance like this. Hurry now, or I'll turn you all out again.'

At length they sat down and began to scavenge in bewildered silence. The cold, stale stink of their predecessors' orgy hung around them. Adriaen filled their glasses with wine. As warmth crept back into their bodies they began to mutter. Adriaen could not distinguish what they said, nor who was saying it. It was like a banquet of ghosts—like an unholy tobacco-vision. Those thick hands clutching the lovely, pale green glass; the verminous beards and toothless jaws moving slowly about cold, greasy bits of meat; the candle-light shining in lifeless eyes and over hunched shoulders, throwing faint, crab-like shadows, filled him with gloom. It was as if the archers were dead, and these dim creatures were their stunted souls returned, perforce, to chew without pleasure the cud of those earthly indulgences from which they were still unable to tear themselves. A vile thought that you might burn out your body and soul in the flames of this life,

only to exist as their ashes in the next. For the first time he doubted his own philosophy.

He took the head of the table, sitting taut and upright, and gazed at his guests feebly absorbing other people's food and drink, muttering and tittering to themselves, solitary in their poverty of body and spirit. Though hungry and longing for drink, he deliberately mortified himself at this table of the living-dead. His eyes filled with tears—tears for himself, for the wealthy horse-playing burghers of Haarlem, for the Spaniard-ridden Netherlands, for the brutish poor, for the whole futile world of men.

A stirring under the table interrupted his melancholy. An empty chair seemed to glide back of its own accord. He shivered. Was he really at a banquet of ghosts? A black, dishevelled head and a pallid face slowly made their appearance. Eyes bulging with sleep blinked round mystified. Then Adriaen recognized Dirk, and a loud burst of laughter started from him. It echoed through the room as if in a burial vault. It was profoundly disturbing. His guests gaped from him to the apparition appearing in their midst. The apparition gaped from him to his guests. Both were terrified by what they saw. At length Dirk gave a hoarse croak and tottered from the room.

CHAPTER VIII

PORTRAIT OF A LOVER

I

THE snow lay a foot thick over the fields outside Haarlem and was heaped up in deep drifts at the street corners, though trodden to a brown slush above the cobbles. A north-east wind, trailing dirty cloud-masses, howled across the marshes and whisked round the houses, penetrating through cracks and underneath doors, so that you were chilled even when crouching over the hearth. Miniature blizzards of snow, whipped up from drifts, spurted in your face as you struggled across the road. Your cloak flapped out behind you, or tied itself trippingly round your legs, when your hands were too numb to hold it in position. Hats flew from heads and went bowling off with laughing children in pursuit. Robins, strayed dogs, cats, and fowls were found dead in the streets each morning and left there, for the cold would prevent decay—but sometimes there was a beggar who had to be buried. Men and women drank heavily to induce a temporary warmth, and the innkeepers made enormous profits. Hals, Adriaen, Van Ostade, and the other apprentices were pelted with snowballs as they went down to the tavern. Hals lost his temper at once and roared at the delighted urchins, but Adriaen enjoyed several battles.

Then there was a thaw and the streets were full of puddles, and the disappointed children could only find small, lustreless patches of dirty snow not worth

playing with. People went about with raw noses, and Hals made the house re-echo with his colossal sneezes. The wind died down, and dark clouds slowly piled themselves up over the town until they burst in slanting spears of rain. The rain went on for days, varied with drifting, chilling sleet, and the damp began to seep into the strongest houses. Van Ostade shivered and sweated and sneezed as he lay on his rags in their attic, looking so comically pathetic that Adriaen insisted that he should lie by the kitchen fire, to Lysbeth's annoyance.

The canals rose, in spite of precautions; the water crept up to street-level, and flooded over the fields and into ground-floor rooms. Water-side workers made money carrying goods to houses and women to market in flat-bottomed boats. Birds and dogs and rats and garbage floated past doors on the rippled, yellow stream, and men splashing through the water frequently splashed into a canal by mistake. Adriaen enjoyed himself at an upper window throwing things at boatloads of people beneath, or fishing with hook and string among miscellaneous refuse, or making rapid impressions in paint.

The wind shifted back, and there were days and nights of clean, frosty skies. The waters drained away from the streets, and the canals slowly sank to a more usual level. The frost intensified. A watery sun shone out of a pale bright sky, and at night Adriaen watched the cruel brilliance of the stars. The taverns were crowded once again. Hals became extremely hearty and worked long hours. Lysbeth had to supply him with enormous, fleshy meals, while Adriaen and the others scrounged what they could get. The fields outside the town on a level with the canals were soon a sheet of ice, and skaters began to make their appearance.

Adriaen slithered along the street to the Groote Markt on Fair Day with a couple of pictures under his arm. The sunlight lay in pale washes upon the Oude Kerk, and warmly upon the dull red brick of the Stadhuis. Between the two the square was packed with booths and people and noise. Tall black hats, black beards, black cloaks, white ruffs; glowing skirts sweeping filth along the ground; burnished pots, hunks of salted meat, pictures, trinkets, shirts, boots, books, tankards, sweets, polished tables; bawling and scandal and giggles. To obtain or spend money for the purposes of eating, drinking, sleeping, and frittering away one's time, seems the sole and inevitable occupation, Adriaen thought. How ridiculous all these people were—so furiously intent on the mere business of living as comfortably as possibly—and such odd things seemed essential to their comfort! Brandy tasted as good out of horn as out of silver, and one sat very much more easily in home-spun than in silk—especially on to-day's slippery streets.

He pushed his way roughly through the crowds towards the dealer's shop, which stood at the corner of the square. Its walls and table and chairs were covered with small, mostly undistinguished representations of contemporary living, usually overwhelmed with ornate frames. Two men and a woman—shopkeepers by their dress—were moving open-mouthed round the room, helplessly unable to make up their minds what to buy.

The dealer, a little thin man, with an appealing way of looking up, and a bad cold which deposited a dew-drop at the end of his shiny nose, except when it was sniffed up again to take momentary refuge among the hairs inside his nostrils, came to greet Adriaen with short, shuffling steps.

'Ah, Brouwer,' he wheezed, 'I'm glad you've come. I had a customer inquiring for your work only this morning.'

'Oh ho! And who was that?'

'Mijnheer Van Thuysen.'

'Never heard of him. What does he make—damasks or diapers?'

'He's a rich man and he knows a picture when he sees it. He wants your stuff. He says it's a new way of looking at life. He will give you a good price. He will make your fortune, eh, boy?'

'And yours?'

The dealer looked up deprecatingly, sniffed, and his dewdrop flipped back into his nostril.

'Oh, no, no! I'm only a poor dealer.'

'Charging a mere fifteen per cent! Well, he may make my fortune, but he can't make me keep it.'

'Show me what you've brought.'

Adriaen produced his pictures, and the little dealer carried them gloatingly over to the window, nodding and smiling. Adriaen wandered round to look at the other paintings. There was nothing very striking to be seen, so he stood behind the three shopkeepers to hear what they had to say.

'Those cows would look well in the living-room.'

'H'mph!'

'I must say I like a cow about. It's nice to look at in the evenings. Reminds me of uncle's farm.'

'H'mph!'

'Or that girl polishing the floor, now?'

'I'd like those gay fellows drinking with those women.'

'Oh, Heindrick! It's a bawdy-house!'

'No! It's religious. It's called "The Return of the Prodigal." It reminds me of . . .'

Adriaen smiled and turned away. So that was how pictures were bought! Probably his tavern peasants were hung in the kitchen to satisfy some serving-woman's sense of social superiority.

The dealer came towards him, grinning delightedly, the dewdrop once more in evidence.

'Yes, Brouwer, I shall get you a good price for these. I shall start at fifty guilders apiece. They are worth it.'

He sneezed.

'They 're worth more than that.'

'I know, dear fellow. Of course they are. But one must go warily. You leave it to me.'

'I won't if you 're only going to ask fifty. They 're good, and, as your customer says, they 're something new—at least, judging by this muck with which you 've bespattered your walls.'

The dealer sniffed—Adriaen, to his annoyance, being just too late to observe the disappearance of the dewdrop—and looked up appealingly.

'Oh, but, Brouwer, I only deal with the best artists, you know, and I 've my reputation to keep up.'

'That 's as maybe. But you must ask seventy-five each for these pictures, or I 'll take 'em straight to another dealer.'

'But, my dear Brouwer! You don't understand business . . .'

'No, I don't—but I understand painting.'

A shadow in the doorway fell across their light. They turned, and Adriaen was surprised to see the cook who had fed him with duck in the kitchen of the Stadhuis, grinning at them all over his egg face.

'What! You here! I thought you were a servant.'

'And I thought you were a cook, not a connoisseur. As a matter of fact, I 'm a painter.'

'Well, now, that's funny! I've never met a painter, I believe, though I've always been interested in painting—so was my dear wife.'

'And what have you come to buy?'

'Oh, I've only come to see my friend'—he nodded at the dealer—'and have a look round. Anything good to-day?'

'Two fine works by Brouwer, here.' The dealer showed Adriaen's pictures. The shopkeepers, still undecided, had looked their way round the room and were now listening to this conversation, staring with disdain, mixed with interest, at a real painter.

'Yes,' said the cook at length. 'You're a clever young fellow, and you've got a turn of humour. I like the woman in this one 'specially. Reminds me of my wife.'

Adriaen chuckled. So pictures must always remind you of something! The woman in question was a cow-like slut. The cook was certainly well rid of his wife.

'Like to buy it?' he asked.

'I would. But I know it's a terrible price.'

'Fifty guilders,' wheezed the dealer, before Adriaen could open his mouth.

'Jesu!'

'Brouwer says it's worth seventy-five.'

'It is,' said Adriaen. 'And this fellow's not going to have it to sell if he asks a stiver less. Hi, you'—he addressed the shopkeepers, who started and gaped at him—'you people who can't make up your minds, here's a couple of fine pieces of work. They'll remind you of your grandparents. I'll let you have them for ninety guilders each. That's fifteen for this old nose-dripping thief here, and seventy-five for me.'

'Don't be rude, young fellow!' The woman turned, and the men followed her back to the cows at the other end of the room.

Adriaen laughed, and took one of his pictures from the dealer and gave it to the cook.

'You can keep that, friend cook,' he said.

The cook opened his mouth and his eyes shone.

'Me—keep this!'

'You—keep that. It's a good picture. You fed me when I was hungry for food. I feed you when you are hungry for—for reminders of your wife. Besides, I like you.'

'But—but what about my price?' roared the dealer huskily, the dewdrop popping out again.

'Devil take you and your price! And if you get less than seventy-five for the other, I'll never bring another picture to your bug-ridden little shop. And now—permit me.'

And he put one hand on the dealer's shoulder, and with the other sleeve he wiped the dewdrop from the end of his nose. Then he walked out into the square.

He made his way through the crowd and turned down towards the Spaarne, now frozen over, stopping for a moment to lean over a bridge. The surface of the ice was white and rough, as if it had been suddenly petrified at a moment of turbulence. Little patches of snow still clung to sheltered parts of roofs. Black, bare branches scratched the bright sky, and the smoke stood up straight from chimneys. A man with voluminous pale brown breeches and cloak flying out behind suddenly shot from under the bridge below him and sped away down the river. By God, thought Adriaen, that looks fun! Why have I never done it before? I shall go and skate at once.

He crossed the bridge and turned into the street leading to the Amsterdamsche Poort, where stood the ancient turreted gateway. Barges and shipping lay frozen in alongside the docks, and there was little activity among the warehouses. He went on out of the town, between skeletons of trees, till he reached the canal, which had spread itself in a still, white sheet over the ground as far as his eyes could reach. The ice under the immense stretch of pale sky was dotted with skaters, gliding with a uniform ungainly grace, singly, in twos and threes, in lines, standing about in groups chatting, or playing golf over the ice with long, curved sticks at a mark set up. Adriaen watched an elderly man and his wife proceeding slowly, hand in hand, leaning over first on one side then on the other, holding out stiff legs with the toe and its curly skate-end stuck up in the air. Their faces were red and solemn and comical. A party of children, pushing a shrieking girl on a sledge, rushed at them from one side. They swerved in front of them just in time, several of the children fell down, the girl and the sledge went shrieking on alone, and the elderly man and his wife came to a dignified halt, bending forward simultaneously to place a hand on a child's back to prevent themselves falling forward. Adriaen laughed and ran eagerly towards the ice.

A little crowd of smartly dressed people were standing by a ramshackle cabin, warming their hands at a brazier of coals and drinking spirits from a table set out with bottles and glasses. Others were sitting on mats, strapping on skates. Under the table was a heap of skates, and a man was strapping a pair to a girl's feet. The girl was Cornelia Van der Branck. Adriaen stood and watched. She had rather a beautiful little

foot. Her skin glowed, and anticipation of pleasure seemed to have sponged some of the hardness from her expression. Something excitingly new stirred in Adriaen.

She stood up ready, smoothing the folds from her bronze-coloured skirt, letting her eyes wander round the faces looking at her, relishing their admiration. Her eyes came to rest on Adriaen, puzzled for a moment, then leaping to amused recollection.

'Ha, the poor lousy painter!'

People turned to stare contemptuously at Adriaen. He bowed.

'Have you come to skate, Mijnheer Painter?'

'If I can beg or steal some skates.'

Cornelia turned to the skate-man:

'Here, hire this man a pair of skates and give him a drink; I'll pay you later.'

'Very good, lady.'

She turned away without another look and walked down to the ice. A man joined her and she accepted his arm. On reaching the ice she struck out skilfully, with strong grace. Adriaen smiled. Cornelia's condescension, he thought, avenges my burnt picture.

'Come on, you!' the skate-man's voice interrupted his thoughts. 'Are you going to keep me waiting all day while you gape after that red-haired baggage? Not that she isn't worth gaping at.'

With his skates strapped on, Adriaen stood carefully up, wobbling a little, and clutching the skate-man for support.

'Here, you put your arm round your high-class ladies, not round me!'

'I think my high-class lady said something about a

drink. I'll have just the smallest drop of brandy, thanks.'

He tossed off the brandy to the skate-man's health, and staggered across the frost-rimed grass, with twigs and tiny patches of ice snapping beneath his skates. At the edge he put a foot on to the ice. It slithered away from him and he sat with a bump among some reeds, which brushed against his face like flimsy sword-blades when he tried to get up. After scrambling for some minutes, continually bruising his thighs, it struck him as funny, and he sat on the ice with his legs stretched out in front, swearing and laughing. Other people thought it funny, too, for there was a little delighted crowd behind him. Freezing dampness began to penetrate to his skin, and he turned his head to shout:

'Here, I've amused you for some time. Repay me by your help.'

Two men came and hoicked him up, brushed him, set both his feet on the ice, tightened a skate-strap, clasped him by the waist and elbows, and began to push. They scrambled along faster and faster. The smooth speed made Adriaen laugh.

'Be careful!' they shouted suddenly. And they gave a final push and let go.

Adriaen rushed on, wobbling backwards and forwards, trying to prevent his skates going in and out, shrieking and clutching the air. Then he was suddenly leaning too far back, his legs shot away up in the air from under him, and he fell with a painful thump. A bellow of laughter came over the ice to him. Fifteen devils! he would never be able to get up again! He would have to stay here till it thawed, unless he crawled back on hands and knees. A grinding of skates and a spurt

of powdered ice, and Cornelia had stopped beside him, stretching out a hand.

'You seem to prefer skating on your rump,' she mocked.

'Appropriate, don't you think?'

She laughed lavishly.

'You were a comic sight! Here, give me your hand.'

'You won't have the strength.'

'Won't I? Dig the heel of one skate in and push up. Now!'

He took her hand. It was smooth, cold, and strong. She jerked and he came up easily. But he went too far, and, falling forward, clutched her round the shoulders. His nose nuzzled for a moment in her fur collar. Her perfume rose to him, and a coil of her red-gold hair tickled his neck.

'I'm beginning to enjoy skating,' he said.

She slowly pushed him upright.

'How well you do it,' he went on. 'I'm itching to be able to fly over the ice like you. Won't you teach me?'

'Very well, then.' She manœuvred him into position. 'Now—strike out sideways—right—left!'

Adriaen wobbled and struck, wobbled and struck. His skates would keep slipping out behind him. Cornelia was flushed and breathing heavily with the exertion of holding him up. Adriaen completely forgot the challenging nearness of her presence in his efforts to make his legs obey him. When they staggered to sit on a log at the side he was feeling a little more confident.

'It's like being drunk,' he said, 'that helpless lack of control—only not so expensive. But I imagine you get the same exultant feeling.'

Cornelia nodded, out of breath. The high colour

softened her face almost to tenderness. Her full bosom rose and fell. She was probably a person of contrasts, Adriaen decided, by turns brazen, prudish, impersonal, clinging, spiteful. He could not yet make up his mind which moods were genuine, but he knew that he wanted to find out. She reminded him of something which he had once experienced—swift and lovely and far beyond them both—but he could not seize the memory, or the dream, or whatever it was.

‘Yes; I’d like to paint you,’ he said suddenly.

She turned to him, obviously pleased.

‘I would like to sit to you. But I doubt if my father or Kervyn would let me come to Mijnheer Hals’s house after the other day. Nor would my father pay you for it.’

‘I shouldn’t want payment. I should enjoy doing it. And I should like finding out all about you.’

Her eyes swam down from his face.

‘Do you have to paint my portrait to do that?’

‘Not necessarily—but it’s a help. Frans always says he knows a hundred times more about a person after painting him. In fact, he wonders some people dare sit to him.’

‘I would dare sit to you. But where, Adriaen, where?’

He opened his eyes at this use of his Christian name.

‘Well, I might perhaps be able to smuggle you up to my attic.’

‘Oh, I should like that!’

‘No, you wouldn’t. It’s dirty, freezing cold, and devoid of furniture. . . . Then I might come to your house.’

‘Impossible.’

‘I’m a very good climber.’

'No, no!'

'Then it looks as if the portrait will have to remain a dream.'

She thought for a moment, then asked: 'How would you paint me?'

'Canvas, you know, a brush or two, and . . .'

'Oh, Adriaen!' She slapped his knee with her glove.

'Forgive me. I have to be facetious. How would you like to be painted?'

'I look best in profile. In blue or pale green, I think, and sitting at a window. The full light suits me. I'm not one of these candle-light beauties.'

'You'd look well skating.'

'A good idea!' Her eyes shone at him. 'Are you coming here to-morrow? If so, you could make a sketch and . . .'

'I hadn't thought of coming, but I shall now—if the frost lasts.'

'Oh, it'll go on like this for days.'

'Then I'll be here, in spite of my aching limbs. And now, please go and skate. I like watching you.'

Her eyes darkened. 'Are you tired of my presence, lousy painter?'

'No, linen merchant's elder daughter. But I like watching people doing things well. There was a cook I watched . . .'

She laughed.

'Oh, curse you! Well, I'm going. I'm cold sitting here. You practise by yourself. Then we'll be able to skate together.' She laid a hand on his knee. 'Oh, I do hope I'm not going to fall in love with a poor lousy painter!'

She sprang up and walked to the edge. He shouted,

'Cornelia!' but she took no notice, and plunged across the ice to join her friends.

He sat watching for a few moments, then he tottered down to the ice.

II

Next day Adriaen worked all the morning, borrowed some money from Van Ostade, and then went to the ice.

'You have no patroness to pay for your hiring, then?' the skate-man asked, as he strapped on Adriaen's skates.

'Has she been here to-day?'

'No—not yet.'

'Plague take her! And did she pay for my skates and drink?'

'No.'

'The bitch! I suppose I shall have to. Now, what about the smallest drop of brandy?'

Adriaen sat on the same log and waited. Last night it had frozen harder than ever, and to-day the sky was solid cloud, a reflection, it seemed, of the ice below. Little chilling airs moved over the surface, as if the ice were breathing. Haarlem looked smaller somehow, houses, church spires, and trees huddling together for warmth, and there were fewer people skating. Adriaen blew into his hands. Curse this woman! She had promised to come and he wanted to see her, and she wasn't here. That was what happened if you let yourself be mixed up with a woman. You were only half a man. Did he really want to paint her? Wealthy girls weren't exactly his subject. But she seemed different. She seemed to despise that phlegmatic obedience of women to men, which even affected

Lysbeth. And she hoped she wasn't going to fall in love with a poor lousy painter—which meant that she had already. Why should she be attracted to a dirty devil like him? Earth to earth? She seemed a rich soil, from which taut, cool petals could spring for his plucking. That would mean an entanglement, and he loathed entanglements. It suddenly struck him that he was that exceptional person—a chaste man. He—and at his age! A humorous record to preserve, especially as no one would believe it.

It was stupid to mope here. He would go and skate, and she could go to the devil! He went. But he knew he was disappointed, and he swore at her for a wanton, and himself for a fool, until he fell full length, taking the skin off his elbows. After this he concentrated on his balance. Soon he was the centre of a crowd of children who skated round and round him, jeering at his clumsy efforts to catch them, squirming out of the way of his lunging grasps, screaming with laughter when he fell, and pulling and pushing to get him on his feet again. In the enjoyment of this, Cornelia was quickly forgotten—and he became much steadier on his skates.

But Cornelia turned over the pages of a book in front of the stove in her bedroom, polished her rings with a cloth, walked from the window looking out over the street to the one looking into the barren garden, and tried not to imagine herself skating with Adriaen, sitting on a log beside him, wondering what was the meaning of that inscrutable expression in his eyes, being kissed by that wide, smiling mouth. She shivered at the idea of the touch of his dirty, unshaven cheek, at the imaginary feel of her fingers in his filthy tangle of black hair, but she could not run away from these

thoughts. Her father wanted her to marry Joris de Roode, so sensible, kindly, and thorough. He called Joris a promising match for any girl. So he was. She liked him, she wanted to marry him. She would be secure and happy with him, and he could afford to give her most things she wanted. She fled instinctively from the disturbing influence of this painter. But suppose he did not come in pursuit? How thankful she would be; how miserable! Marry Adriaen and live in a hovel? She laughed. Become his mistress? Fascinating in theory, loathsome in practice. Besides, would she dare? Would her conscience allow? What about father and Kervyn? Oh, she despised them! And Joris? He would be hurt, and she would hate to hurt him. Where was Adriaen all this time? Was he falling about ridiculously on the ice? Was he waiting on the log? Or was he painting happily, having completely forgotten their assignation? Perhaps he was drunk? . . .

There was a knock at the door. A servant entered.

'Mijnheer de Roode is below. Mijnheer Van der Branck wishes you to come down.'

'Very well. Tell him I will come in a few minutes.'

She could feel the maid's eyes looking her over critically, with envy and unwilling approval. It was pleasant to be envied. The girl was a good maid, even though she probably did spy on her and read all her letters. She would give her some jewel she no longer wanted.

'You may go.'

Cornelia went to her mirror with a rather lighter heart. Joris had come to see her. She would take this as an omen. There were lines creeping round her eyes and mouth already. Joris would not like them—

if he ever noticed. Dear Joris! She must be skilled with her preparations, for Joris disliked artificiality. She curled the hair over her forehead and round her ears, brushed the rest so that it shone glassily, and tied a little bow of sombre velvet to a curl at the side of her head. She put two big pearls in her ears, and a string of pearls to set off her pale gold skin. She tied a cape of black velvet round her shoulders, and put on her big turquoise ring. Then she was suddenly frightened of going down to meet the kindly man whom she had betrayed in thought, and stood biting at a nail, looking down into the cold, empty street.

III

The night of the Ice Revels was perfect—crisp frost, a star-filled sky, a large moon. Shopkeepers had set up their booths near the Amsterdamsche Poort and along the Amsterdam canal to the town gate, where frozen canal and frozen fields became one. Torches flamed above and braziers burned beside the booths, with quivering reflections across the gleaming ice and a warm glow over the brick houses. Coloured lanterns hung in semicircles below the bridges, from the branches of the trees along the canals, and on the masts and bulwarks of the shipping, daggering the ice in green and red and gold. The ice was covered with skaters and the still air filled with their din. The rest of the town was almost deserted. Those who were not skating sat and watched and drank and smoked and ate beside the canals. The richer and more enterprising entertained aboard barges hired for the occasion. People paraded arm-in-arm up and down the streets and leaned over the bridges, waving and yelling

to their friends. Lines of skaters, holding hands and stretching across the canals, rushed up and down trying to sweep away every one they met. Opposition lines met them with a crash, a general shrieking scramble, a re-forming of the lines, and then on again, while the bystanders rescued those left lying on the ice. Lovers sought a hiding-place in deep shadows at the junction of bridge and canal, only to be dragged out with coarse jeers. Beside a barge an old man was selling roast chestnuts from a brazier. A little crowd of boys were buying them, tossing them in the air to save burnt fingers, eating some and pushing the others down the necks of screaming girls. Then the ice melted beneath the brazier, the old man and brazier went in, and the boys fled, shrieking. Decorous dancing took place on land to the screeching of bagpipes and flutes, and comfortable middle-class souls, warmed with wine, hands folded in lap, sat and sang sentimental songs to mandolins. But they were all drowned by the blare of music from a procession moving slowly down the ice, headed by a giant car on runners, pulled with coloured ropes by fifty dressed-up skaters, on which municipal worthies posed shivering as various heroes from Haarlem history. But no one could see who they were meant to be, the noise was overpowering, and the car obstructed the skaters, so the worthies were bombarded from all sides with any missile to hand, and quickly retired. At the same time the procession was charged by hundreds of angry skaters, the car broken up, and the bits thrown at the watchers on the banks.

From the resulting shambles Adriaen emerged, bruised, bleeding, and happy. He had just had the pleasure of crowning Kervyn Van der Branck—who had

posed as one of Haarlem's heroes—with an inverted bowl of hot squashy porridge snatched from a neighbouring food-stall. He was sufficiently drunk not to mind falling about, but not too drunk to snatch every enjoyment, aesthetic and physical, from the occasion. He had left Lysbeth dancing riotously with a neighbour, and Hals sitting with the neighbour's wife on his knee and a jug of wine in his hand. He had caught a glimpse of Roelandts sitting on the ice, swearing, and rubbing the back of his head. He had snatched a kiss from a startled woman—an unsatisfactory kiss, for her mouth was crammed with pigs' trotters. He had passed two earnestly drunken young fops who were playing a golf match from Haarlem to Amsterdam. Then he had joined in the fight with the procession, and there to his delight was Kervyn, as a Haarlem hero, giving an unconscious imitation of his father. And if Kervyn was here, it was probable that the rest of the family were, including Cornelia.

He skated in search, and later caught sight of Kervyn sitting on the bulwarks of a barge, lit by a string of red lanterns. He was leaning forward and his mother was busily scrubbing his head with a dish-cloth. Adriaen laughed. Behind Kervyn, bathed in this demoniacal light, sat Mijnheer Van der Branck, shivering in furs, at the head of a table of guests. A man at one side was singing to a mandolin, but no one was listening. Cornelia sat with her back to Adriaen. The man next to her had an arm round her waist. They did not seem to talk much to each other. Cornelia, dressed in deep blue, was shivering and taking little sips from her wine-glass. It did not seem to be a very light-hearted gathering, Adriaen thought, though Dirk Hals would have liked to paint them. A dwarf jumped on to the

barge and did somersaults, hand-springs, and contortions. They watched in silence and Van der Branck threw him a coin, which he bit, glanced at, and then threw back with an obscene gesture, and scrambled ashore again. Van der Branck pocketed the coin. They sat on with desultory chatter, and at length clambered down wooden steps on to the ice.

Cornelia skated off hand-in-hand with her neighbour at table. Adriaen followed. He noticed that she skated far more strongly than her partner. Again they did not talk much. Their progress seemed to be quite aimless. They stopped sometimes to buy Cornelia sweetmeats, or watch a game of rommelpot, or listen to a tubby little hatless pastor, who was prophesying for the manifold iniquities of these revels the punishments of Tyre, Sidon, Nineveh, and Lot's wife. Then a couple of hearty acquaintances claimed Cornelia's companion for a moment, and he let go of her hand. Adriaen skated up, poked her in the middle of the back, turned his head for a second, smiled, skated on a short way, and then slipped aside into the shadow of a ship's bows. A moment later Cornelia joined him, and huddling together they watched Joris go slowly peering by.

'Who 's that fellow ?' Adriaen asked.

'Joris de Roode,' she whispered, 'and I 'm going to marry him. Oh, why have I done this ? He will be so worried.'

'Because you can't resist the fascinations of a poor lousy painter.'

'Oh, can't I ?'

She snatched herself away from him and started off down the canal after Joris. Adriaen went in pursuit, managing to keep her in sight by going as fast as he could, and thankful that he had practised so hard.

She went on and on, looking all round her. There was no sign of Joris in the crowd. Oh, why had he let her give him the slip like that? Why wasn't he here to reclaim her? He deserved that she should make a fool of herself. She glanced back. Adriaen was still coming after her, arms whirling in the air. His skating had improved, but she could easily draw away from him if she wished. Oh, where was Joris? It had been quiet and comfortable sitting at supper with his arm round her waist, pleasantly amusing looking at all the sights with him. Why hadn't she been content to wait while he shouted platitudes at his friends? She would have to do so often enough in the future. And then this dirty, grinning, exciting young devil rushes up with his eyes shining and his careless gesture, and she loses her head at once!

The fortifications loomed up on either side. The canal was dark and almost deserted. The din and the lights were growing faint behind her. Joris could not have come all this way. Poor Joris, he would tell a pitiful tale of her disappearance, and they would all come in search of her. And what was she to say when they found her? She would go a little further, just in case. Then she could easily dodge past Adriaen and return to the barge.

She stopped, panting. The canal and the ice sheet outside the town were merging into one. There was thick darkness ahead and a reflection of the moon across the empty ice. She shivered. She was tired, and did not want to face the long skate back to the barge. As she turned she heard the swish of skates, and Adriaen was coming at her. He sat down suddenly and slithered sitting towards her.

'God's love, you 've given me a run! Pray forgive

my position, but it's the only way I can stop.' He scrambled to his feet and brushed his clothes. 'And I couldn't see your betrothed anywhere. I'm afraid we must have missed him on the way!'

He reached out to take her hand, but she pulled it from him.

'No, no, Adriaen! Let me alone. I want to go back to my family.'

She turned and struck out for the open ice.

'Hi!' Adriaen yelled, 'you're going the wrong way!' Then, as she took no notice, he shouted: 'I'll catch you up in Amsterdam,' and went off after her.

It was fun, this pursuit down the moon-path over the ice. He would overtake her in good time. She was tiring and kept looking back at him. It had all happened before, but he could not remember how or where. It did not matter. It was a noble sensation, this flying over the ice. He started to shout a song. He wanted to go on like this for ever. And it was almost certain to mean disillusionment when he caught Cornelia. Suddenly she stumbled and nearly fell. He felt a surprising gush of tenderness. He slowed down and managed to stop beside her.

'Darling, you nearly fell!'

'I'm so tired.'

He put his arms round her and kissed her eyes and gently ran his lips over her forehead and cheeks. They were warm and soft. He put her head on to his shoulder and his nose into her neck. Once again her perfume rose to him. She put her head up and laid her cheek against his. He looked round. They were alone in this austere wilderness of ice, as alone as two stars in the depth of space, two stars which have crashed blindly together and which will burn themselves out in

a white heat. He pulled her head round to kiss her lips. She flung her arms about his neck, and pressed her body against his. She murmured his name into his lips and rubbed her face against them, as if she were trying to climb into him by way of his mouth. It was all a little too much for his balance. He wobbled and clutched at her wildly. She just managed to hold him up, and they were separated.

He laughed. Life always put out its tongue at you.

Cornelia was whispering: 'Why do you laugh at my love-making?'

'I wasn't. Far from it. Your love-making literally knocked me off my feet!'

'Then why did you laugh?'

He shrugged his shoulders. She wouldn't understand.

'Oh, Adriaen!'

Hell fire! She was weeping. He took her in his arms again. But when his lips were on hers he felt the flame quiver inside him and spread from his body to hers, running through them both, licking them up until they were two intermingling tongues of fire, which seemed to fill all the world. Then their eyes were absorbing each other, hands hanging loosely at their sides, no sound but their breathing. At length he put his arm round her, and they skated off slowly in the direction of Haarlem.

'Where are you taking me?' she asked.

'God knows!'

She clutched his wrist tightly, her fingers biting into him.

'Not back there, Adriaen! I'm frightened of going back. Can't we stay out here?'

'You'll find it rather cold.'

'We shall be warm together.'

'My darling, I 've lain on the ice more than you have . . .'

They swept on. She dreaded leaving this ice-bound fantasy of a world. She wanted to cling to this madness, now that it was on her.

She pulled up his hand and put it to her mouth.

'Oh, Adriaen, I am betrothed to Joris de Roode!'

'And you adore Adriaen Brouwer. And he adores you—the little he knows of you—and he has been warm to-night for the first time this winter, and he likes it.'

'My father, brother, and Joris are searching for me now.'

'We 'll find an empty barge, Cornelia, and . . .'

'What shall I do if they find us together?'

'And when no one 's looking, we 'll creep into it. . . .'

'Adriaen, I daren't!'

'Don't be a little fool, Cornelia! You know you 're longing to creep into an empty barge with me. Be honest with yourself, darling!'

'You filthy, smelly, loathly beast! . . .'

'Who loves you!'

'You brutal ravisher!'

'Who loves you!'

'You . . .'

Adriaen ran his tongue over his lips. They tasted of hers. He was suddenly tired of playing. He was on fire with this girl. He clutched her arm and struck out for the skate-hirer's cabin, which he had noticed over on his left. Cornelia allowed herself to be dragged across the ice. He pulled her inside the cabin. It was pitch-dark and coldly fuggy. On the floor were the mats on which the skaters sat while their skates

were fitted. Adriaen straightened them out as best he could, groping slowly and methodically though his fingers were trembling. Then he called Cornelia to him. She came obediently, fumbling for him in the darkness. . . .

IV

'Hell!' roared Hals, slapping the supper table and knocking over his wine cup. 'You're about as good company nowadays, Adriaen, as a lump of stale mutton fat!'

Lysbeth clucked her tongue and went pouting for a cloth.

'You don't eat. You used to drink like a man. Now you have a couple of thimblefuls—when you come to the tavern at all—and brood like an old cow.'

'And you haven't sung to us for days.' Lysbeth began slopping up the mess, till Hals smacked her posterior and sat her down on his knee, snatching the damp cloth from her hand and throwing it at Adriaen.

'You've forgotten each day to start on that background until I've driven you to it. Nor have you told me a single story lately. God! man, why d'you think I keep you here? To amuse me. You can't paint, you can't . . .'

This roused Adriaen. He looked up at last from his plate and gripped the table. But he was forestalled by Van Ostade.

'That's nonsense, master!' he exclaimed. 'Adriaen paints almost as well as you do already.' Lysbeth looked round anxiously, but her husband was enjoying his abuse of Adriaen and was in a mood to chuckle loftily. 'If you want to know the truth, he has been ill for some time, and . . .'

Adriaen could not stand being protected by Van Ostade. He threw back his head and laughed.

'Well, if you let me stay on here merely as unpaid buffoon, you can look for another. I'm going. It's quite immaterial to me where I live, and I can't be more uncomfortable than I am in your house. And there are other masters of painting in Holland.'

Lysbeth stretched out a hand towards him.

'Don't go—and tell us her name.'

Adriaen laughed and leaned across the table to squeeze Lysbeth's hand.

'You're right, Lysbeth. Trust a woman! You're right, too, Frans. My existence is hardly justified if I don't either paint or amuse people. Well, I've let myself go crazy over a girl—but *crazy!*'

'Ho, ho!' roared Frans, 'so our handsome young cynic is ensnared by love. Jesu, that's funny!'

Lysbeth jumped off his knee.

'Oh, hold your stupid tongue!' she snapped. Then more gently, going round to Adriaen: 'Tell me her name, Adriaen.' Frans puffed out his cheeks and reached for the wine jug.

'Cornelia Van der Branck,' Adriaen said.

Lysbeth began clearing away dishes.

'You poor fool!' she murmured.

Hals wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

'Jesu! If that isn't juicier than your stories! An apprentice painter without a stiver in his pocket, and a red-headed troll daughtered to one of the richest men in Haarlem! When's the wedding, lad? Mind you invite me. The fair Cornelia in cloth of gold and the foul Adriaen in rags!' And he went off again into guffaws.

'Can't you keep quiet!' Lysbeth exclaimed.

'Don't be so cruel, master!' Van Ostade added.

'Anyhow, I've succeeded in amusing you again,' said Adriaen. 'As a matter of fact, she's going to marry a fellow called de Roode, and after what happened here the other day I doubt if you will get an invitation.'

Hals stared at him, blinking moisture from his bloodshot eyes.

'You aren't telling me you're her lover?'

'I have been, and if I'm not again soon, I'll go mad.'

'You lucky dog!' He gulped down some wine and leaned forward quickly. 'Tell me what happened!'

Adriaen rose. 'God forbid! Good night.'

'Where are you going?' Lysbeth asked.

'To explore once again the gardens of the rich!' Adriaen answered, making a face at her.

And Hals's bellow of laughter followed him out into the slush of the thaw.

V

SOME nights afterwards, at a much later hour, he walked in the direction of the Van der Brancks'. It would be as usual, he supposed. He would climb the low wall and wait in the shrubs, with moisture dripping on to his hair and neck. He would see the light appear in her room, watch it for an hour, and then see it extinguished. He would continue to crouch in the damp shrubs, until seized with violent cramp. Perhaps he would walk along the flat top of the wall and try to peep into her room. Curse him for a fool, with this blind obsession—as bad as Bladelin and his religion!

To-night he was tired and wretched—the sort of feeling he experienced after a deep smoking trance. Even brandy had failed him. It had merely deepened

his misery and given him a headache, as if pegs of ice were being driven into his forehead just above his eyebrows. This craving for Cornelia was far worse than for drink or tobacco: and was it any more exalted an appetite? It even prevented him from painting — except for sketch after unsatisfactory sketch of Cornelia—the one thing which he thought was always sacred. Why, why hadn't she come out to him? She knew he would be there. He had told her. She had promised to come. Had she forgotten the skater-hirer's cabin? Were fear, conscience, and de Roode too much for her? Plague take her—and him—and all irresolute fools!

As he crouched down in the shrubs he was grateful for the comparative warmth of the night. It was slushy under-foot, but the wind from the south-west was warm and it might have been pleasant here under the stars.

Some time later, a light in Cornelia's room startled him out of his dejected coma. He rose stiffly from his uncomfortable position. He thought he saw the curtains move slightly and he waved frantically. Then his arms flopped to his sides; very probably his tired eyes were playing him tricks. He stood there, passively unhappy. The light went out again soon afterwards. . . .

Cornelia, wrapped in furs, stood hesitating in the darkness by the door leading into the garden. The risk was so very slight. All the others had gone out some time ago to a birthday party and the servants were in bed. Joris had not been asked to the party, and she had made this and the inevitable headache her rather feeble excuses for not going. She knew that Adriaen was out there. She had watched him arrive each night, and then lain trembling in her bed, pleased yet terrified

of possible consequences. He was capable of anything rash. Well, the poor man had waited many nights. He had earned some kind of reward. Could she be cool and sensible about him now? She had shown him sufficiently that there was really a great gap between them, only to be bridged at her condescension. And to-night presented such a perfect opportunity for the sweets of playing with fire. Yet she hesitated. She was fond of Joris and she didn't want to lose him. She had somehow felt more tenderly towards him since her experiences with Adriaen. Yes, she was grateful to Adriaen for that. But the night of the Ice Revels had now definitely become her 'past.' In later years she would be able to boast of her rather unusual conquest and enjoy the envy of fellow-gossips. She would be kind to Adriaen when she was married. Perhaps she and Joris could get him some commissions. She might even introduce him into society — 'My friend, the painter' — and if he did try to snatch kisses — well, Joris's weren't nearly so exciting. Poor Adriaen, with his flattering love! She would be very firm with him. No more playing with fire. This difficult relationship must be ended to-night. She should have ended it long ago. A few words, perhaps a kiss, then gentle security with Joris. She quietly opened the door and stepped out.

Adriaen saw something blacker than the darkness moving towards him along the garden path. He felt suddenly giddy. Then he saw that it was really Cornelia, and ran to meet her and seized her in his arms. At length he stood back, panting, clutching both her hands.

'Ugh!' she whispered. 'You smell vilely of brandy.'

'Cornelia! God's love! It's paradise to see you!'

'I can only stay a moment. The others will be

back soon.' She was frightened now and wished she had not come out. He was so violent. She tried to drag her hands away.

'Adriaen, please listen. I want to tell you . . .'

'Cornelia! I'm mad—stark, raving mad for you, Cornelia! I can't paint—or rather I've painted Cornelia, Cornelia, Cornelia! Yes, four Cornelias. And all thrown away. As much like the real Cornelia as a still-life is like a glass of brandy! The real Cornelia—white hot amid the frost!'

He jerked her towards him. She struggled, cursing herself, desperately afraid of what he would do, of what she might do.

'Cornelia! Don't waste any more moments!'

Trembling, she held him off, whispering the words she had thought out.

'Adriaen—you must stop this. It's impossible—you and me. . . . Please! Don't think I'm not—grateful. But you mustn't see me—not for a long time. And I want you to be a great painter—a great success. . . .'

His hands fell from her—and he was gaping at her almost stupidly. Heaven! what was he going to do? She could shriek, of course, and someone would come—and she would be discovered. No—she must go on talking now.

'Dear Adriaen. . . . In the future, some time—we'll laugh over the past. There will always be something between us, won't there? I'm grateful, Adriaen. And I'll be able to show my gratitude, because Joris and I will be able to help you—introduce you to influential . . .'

She stepped back in horror, as Adriaen shattered her cobweb of good intentions by the blast of his laughter. She cried: 'Hush, Adriaen! Someone will . . .'

'God above!' he shouted. 'I'm mad for her, and she offers me patronage! So I'm to be your pet painter! And, when the mood takes you, and your rich boor of a husband isn't looking, serve to titillate your senses with a little furtive love-play.'

'Oh, Adriaen, quiet, quiet!'

'Frans was right. I am the biggest fool in Christendom. Poor Cornelia, only a timid sensualist, after all! I am her infatuated lover, and she offers me her future patronage! God above! how gloriously funny! Farewell, Mevrouw de Roode.'

Adriaen went into peals of laughter, made a parody of a bow, and turned away, still laughing. Cornelia watched him clamber up the wall, sit on top for a moment, his body shaking, wave his hand, and then disappear. His laughter died away in the distance. She turned back to the house in tears.

CHAPTER IX

PORTRAIT OF A BUFFOON

I

ADRIAEN sat on the sill of the open studio window, playing a mandolin and singing. He made up words and music as he went along, inventing a lampoon on each passer-by. With a dearth of victims outside, he stopped and watched, fascinated by the confident vigour with which Hals painted—the slashing strokes of the big brush filled with almost pure colour, the gross body thrust forward as if he were going to hug his canvas, the sweat running down his cheeks, the heavy irregular breathing through his distended nostrils.

Hals looked up and swore. ‘Sit still, curse you! And I told you to look out of the window and smile!’

‘Sorry, master. But I like watching you; one sees you at your best when painting.’

‘Grrr! I don’t see you at your best when painting you. I see a weakling, a sot, full of every vice . . .’

‘Except one, Frans—women.’

‘. . . I don’t mind vicious men, but I hate dishonest ones.’

‘I’m only dishonest over money.’

‘And isn’t that bad enough? God alone knows how much you owe me, and God knows when I shall see it again!’

‘God and I.’

‘But there’s something at the depth of you I can’t bring out to put on to canvas. It’s so overlaid with

muck of all kinds. It's maddening me . . . Jesu! Can't you look out of that—window—and—smile ?'

Hals had dressed him up in player's hat and clothes—red, slashed with yellow—and the portrait when finished was to be called 'The Buffoon.' He had no commissions on hand, so he had put Adriaen up by the window, and was now engrossed and sweating.

Lysbeth approached along the street with Sara. Adriaen kissed and waved his hand, and Sara timorously waved a doll. She was no longer actively frightened of him, but shyly intrigued and even ready to laugh. When they were within earshot, Adriaen started singing:

'From girlhood's thoughts and toys
Few women ever wake.

Men remain frightened boys—
But at least their voices break. . . .'

'Sing sense,' Hals grumbled, 'if you must sing.'

'It is sense, Frans. You know you're only a frightened . . .'

'Silence! Jesu! You're the worst model I've ever had.'

Hals attacked the canvas with his brush again. Lysbeth and Sara came in. Sara ran across the room, crying:

'Look! I have a new doll, Adriaen!'

But she swerved to avoid Frans's easel, and, overbalancing, brushed against his arm, causing him to make a smudge. He turned, furious, threw his brush at Sara, and shouted:

'The devil take you, clumsy little rat!'

Sara was not hurt, only terrified. She screeched and ran to her mother, who knelt with wide arms to receive her.

Hals, shaking with anger, stamped over to stand above them.

'Why can't you control your accursed brat?' he roared. Lysbeth was plainly frightened, too. Adriaen watched her lips drawn in whitely to half their fullness; and her eyelids blinked over her usually drowsy eyes, now stung to cold brightness. She pressed Sara's head to her bosom.

'Only a child's clumsiness, Frans!'

'What about my spoiled picture? Answer me that!'

'Don't be a fool, Frans!' said Adriaen. 'You can always paint over it.'

Hans turned on Adriaen. 'How dare you interfere, you drunken swine!'

Adriaen strummed on his mandolin and sang:

'Ill-tempered Frans, who maltreats his kin,
So mean that his paint-brushes grow on his chin. . . .'

But he underestimated Hals's rapidity of movement, and found himself being forced back out of the window with two squeezing hands at his throat. Next moment he fell with a bump on to the road outside. He got up, rubbing the back of his head, with tongues of fire floating before his eyes, vaguely thankful that the studio was on the ground floor, and leant against the wall for a few minutes. Then he went to the studio window and peeped in. Lysbeth and Sara had disappeared. Frans was fiercely repainting, muttering to himself. Adriaen climbed in and took up his original position, playing quietly and watching a bird-squabble in a tree. He smiled to himself, glad to realize that the quarrel in the tree was of equal importance to him as the quarrel in the studio. He suddenly heard Hals shout:

'Yes! Like that! Why the devil couldn't you sit like that before?'

The shout made him jump and turn, and Hals swore. Then there was a knock at the door. Hals swung round and stood with his head thrust ominously forward. Roelandts entered, immense and genial, ushered in by Lysbeth, shrinkingly composed.

'You, is it, curse you, Roelandts?' was Hals's welcome.

'Yes'—Roelandts was heartily facetious—'it's little me!'

'Come to have a bit of a *chat*, I dare say!' Hals flung his palette and brush on to the table and dragged a chair heavily across the floor for his guest, indicating it with burlesque politeness.

'Some wine, wife, for this gentleman, and bring two glasses. If I can't paint, I shall have to drink!'

Lysbeth hurried to the cupboard. Roelandts's round face shone with embarrassment. He asked: 'What are you working on, Hals?'

Frans jerked a thumb over his shoulder at Adriaen. 'That garbage!'

'The *portrait*,' Adriaen explained, 'is to be called "The Buffoon," if you please, while the painter . . .'

Just in time he caught Lysbeth's beseeching eye.

'May I look?' Roelandts asked hastily.

'I don't care two stivers what you do!'

Roelandts heaved himself out of his chair, like a cow struggling up from the ground, and waddled across the room. Lysbeth put down the tray on the table. Hals snatched up the bottle, poured out two glasses, and drained both. 'Aah, that's better!' He smacked his lips and watched Roelandts for a moment. 'Good, eh, Roelandts?' he asked. Lysbeth and Adriaen looked at

each other, Adriaen with a smile, Lysbeth with a sigh of relief.

'One of your very best. And I have a matter to put to you, Hals, which may be pleasant hearing. Two or three of us at the 'Doele' the other evening after shooting thought we ought to have a group portrait of the Archers' Guild. And who better or more appropriate than yourself to paint it?'

Adriaen watched Lysbeth's eyes travelling from one man to the other, and finally fixing anxiously on her husband. To her obvious relief, he answered: 'Why, of course, yes, I'd be glad to do it. Come and have a drink, Roelandts.' She smiled at Adriaen, filled the two glasses, and went out of the room. Here was another woman worth knowing besides his mother, Adriaen thought. Women! He'd never put another woman who wasn't uglier than Satan into a picture again. They were mostly either animal-like sluts, fit only for the reproduction of their wretched kind, or mean, tittering harlots, without even the courage of their sensuality. Love! He preferred brandy. Well, life was an idiot thing—like a crowd—and it kept tripping you up to laugh at you. He'd never plunge into it again. Yet he was continually being sucked into the little fussy whirlpools of other people's lives, and it was as hard to stand aloof as it was to get out again once he was in, especially as he so often made the mistake of liking people. . . .

Roelandts was saying: '. . . Yes, they'd set sail for Rotterdam, and were blown north to The Hague. They tried to make a landing at Scheveningen, but the first boat was capsized, and they were blown north again. When the wind died they were able to make Zandvoort. They're lying there now, and De Zeven,

from whom I had the news, says they mean to march to Haarlem to try to raise funds. But I doubt if they 'll be able to—you can't trust an Englishman, I 've heard tell.'

'Shall we be safe from them, Roelandts? They 're wild devils, they say. Will they be like the Spaniards?'

Roelandts gave a fat bellow of laughter.

'Why, of course not, man! They 've come to fight against the Spaniards.'

Hals was still suspicious.

'What do they want to do that for? It 's not their quarrel. It 's my belief they 're after plunder.'

'That 's true—but it 's Spanish plunder they want. They 're just a company of adventurers—like German mercenaries—ready to hire themselves out. But not to the Spaniards. They hate them. Besides, they 're Protestants.'

'Well, that 's something. But I hope to God they won't come and billet themselves in the town. No man's wife or money-chest will be safe if they do. I could wish they 'd landed safely at Rotterdam.'

Just then Lysbeth came in with a letter.

'For me, wife?' Hals held out his hand.

'No; for Adriaen.'

'God! Why should any one want to write to that sot?'

'It 's a woman's writing,' said Lysbeth with a smile, 'and a servant brought it!'

Adriaen opened it. He read:

I have forgiven everything. I hope I am forgiven too. I realize you have the most to forgive. Show that you forgive by coming to our wedding feast. I should like to see you after all this time. I will tell you the date and place when I know that you will forgive.—CORNELIA VAN DER BRANCK.

'What's it about?' Lysbeth whispered in her eagerness.

'Forgiveness, mostly.'

He thrust the letter at her. She devoured it.

'Frans, can I borrow these clothes to attend a wedding in?' Adriaen asked.

II

Once again, walking away from Cornelia's wedding feast, Adriaen cursed himself for a fool. It had been a mistake to go. He had thought that it might be amusing to watch how she carried off the probably embarrassing moment of their meeting. So he had borrowed money from Hals, bought himself some white cloth, painted it with exquisite little flowers, and had it made up by the best tailor in Haarlem. But every one at the feast had talked endlessly about his clothes. Men whom he did not know had inquired where he got them. Tipsy women had fawned over him. Kervyn had been sarcastic. And finally, Cornelia, showing no signs of confusion, had been condescendingly complimentary, and asked him to procure her some of the material. At last, satiated with all this drunken, superficial garrulity, he had seized a tureen of brown gravy from a table and emptied it over his suit, murmuring: 'I thought you'd invited *me*, not my clothes.' Then he had walked out of the house to the tavern, where he really felt at home.

At the tavern he found Hals and Adriaen Van Ostade glaring at a group of men drinking in a corner—foreigners by their looks—evidently those Englishmen about whom Roelandts was talking. There were five of them, officers or nobles by their dress. They were

fairer and less hirsute than Dutchmen, but otherwise very similar. They were talking and laughing loudly, unconsciously convinced of their own inherent superiority, blandly ignoring the natives to whose country they were visitors, though one of them shouted continually for more drink in excellent and courteous Dutch. They stared at Adriaen and his dirty clothes with surprise for a moment, laughed a little, and then returned to their own conversation.

He sat down near Hals and called for brandy. Hals turned to him angrily:

'See those conceited swine—behaving as if the whole of Holland was theirs! God, I 'd like to push my sword-blade! . . . And what the devil have you been doing? Look at that suit! Did you have to be thrown out?'

'No.'

'You 've ruined my clothes!'

'They 're not your clothes.'

'They are. You borrowed the money from me.'

'At a heavy security. And even if the clothes did belong to you, you 'd never succeed in forcing your monstrous, swollen belly and thighs into them. You 've got the figure of a pregnant slut, and you 're distorted with envy of me because I paint nearly as well as you.'

Frans was evidently wanting to get rid of his antipathy to the foreigners on someone, and Adriaen was in no mood to be his scapegoat. He was always being the scapegoat nowadays. Besides, he rather liked the look of these Englishmen.

Hals's hand was already on his dagger. Van Ostade, hoping to keep the peace between the two men he admired most, protested:

'But, Adriaen, the master has some sort of claim, you know. I really think that . . .'

'Of course I 've got some sort of claim, you neighing ninny!' Hals banged the table, so that the Englishmen looked round with amused superciliousness. 'You 'll give me back those clothes, Adriaen Brouwer, as well as the security!'

'The clothes, certainly.' Adriaen tore off his suit, standing up in his ragged shirt and hose. 'Here they are! Take them.'

He rolled them up in a ball and presented them to Hals with a low bow.

Hals swore and took a kick with his jack-boot, which sent the ball flying from between Adriaen's hands.

'Very well, then.' Adriaen picked up the clothes, walked over to the fire, thrust them in, and stood there warming his legs. The foreigners, who had watched the incident as if they had been at the play, burst into peals of laughter. Adriaen bowed to them gravely. Hals struggled to his feet, stamped across, followed by the worried Van Ostade, and seized Adriaen, thrusting his beard insultingly up into his face.

'You can go, d' you hear! I won't have you in my household any longer!'

'Very well. I am exceedingly uncomfortable there.'

'Oh, no, master! No, no, Adriaen!' Van Ostade seized them both by the arm.

'Yes, yes, Adriaen!' Adriaen mimicked. 'I am tired of Haarlem, and of Hals, who has overworked and underfed and treated me with the utmost stinginess for years, besides being jealous of me. You will please see to the sale of my pictures to pay for my debts—of course keeping anything you may want for yourself. I shall go elsewhere.'

'But, Adriaen, for God's sake think what you 're doing! You . . . '

'I never think what I'm doing. Wait, though, you might lend me some money before I go.'

'Adriaen, what will you do?'

Adriaen shrugged his shoulders. Then he suddenly walked across to the foreigners, to whom he bowed, and addressed the one who spoke Dutch.

'Perhaps you want recruits for your company? I hear you suffered losses at sea. I will dare anything, play and sing to you, draw your portraits, borrow your money, drink all of you under the table, and tell you good stories. Moreover, I hate the Spanish.'

The interpreter translated, and the Englishmen talked, looking Adriaen over as if he had been a horse, while he paraded before them, mimicking a woman showing off her charms.

'Good!' said the interpreter at length. 'That is settled. We march to-morrow to throw ourselves into Breda, which is besieged.'

'A devilish long march!'

'And you will need some clothes to march in. Meanwhile, we will drink to our bargain, the success of our company, and plenty of plunder. Hi! host! Ale and breeches for this gentleman.'

'I'd rather have the smallest drop of brandy, thanks.' Adriaen turned to say farewell to Hals and Van Ostade, but they had both gone.

CHAPTER X

PORTRAIT OF A SOLDIER

I

ON the long march south from Haarlem to Breda Adriaen grew to like these Englishmen. He liked their simplicity, their humour, their sentimentality, their childish love of animals and play; while their startling inconsistency and more than Dutch complacency made him laugh. With his songs, his mimicry, his caricatures, his comic but successful attempts at their language, and his gift for shirking his duties, he was soon notorious in the company. Once used to the endless marching he enjoyed the life, except that he could not paint, and the only drink which he could easily obtain was the strong, sickly English ale. Hals, Lysbeth, Van Ostade were forgotten, and even Cornelia became just a joke against himself.

When they arrived near Breda one stormy afternoon, Walter Haddon, the English captain, sent for him. The interpreter told him that, as it would be a perfect night to enter the town, he was to go on ahead and arrange for a sortie to divert the Spaniards' attention. Adriaen asked how the devil he was to get into Breda. The interpreter shrugged his shoulders.

'A man like you should be able to think of something.'

'You know, this plan is very well from your point of view. You English don't often look at things from others' points of view, do you? But it's a pestilential idea for me and for the people in Breda.'

'Why ?'

'I may be captured or killed.'

'Well, you are a soldier.'

'Thanks. . . . And the people of Breda may not want you.'

'Not want us ?'

'No. Food 's scarce, and you 'll be so many more to feed.'

'But we 've travelled all these hundreds of miles to help them.'

'And make what you can out of it.'

'Don't argue! Besides, we have already communicated with de Leestmaller, their commander. You start for Breda at once. We follow in a few hours.'

'And where the devil 's Breda ?'

'Straight through this wood. Keep the pole star behind you.'

'Give me some ale before I go—if you haven't any brandy.'

'Let him take a bottle.'

The ale was Adriaen's undoing, and nearly that of the English company. He lost his way in the wood. He could not remember which was the pole star. He fell into ditches and bogs, and lay down in terror when he heard cows moving away from him. But the storm was at its height, and the cold, blown rain sobered him sufficiently to prevent him from snoring where he lay. The cows must have moved continuously in front of him, for there was suddenly a loud report, which made him jump and sweat, and a sentry's musket-ball hissed by. He ran as fast as he could until he collided with a tree stump. Then he lay very still, expecting a thrust from a Spanish pike. But nothing happened, so he thanked God for the filthy night which would confine

the enemy to their tents, and he started off again in what he hoped was the right direction.

When at last he reached the East Gate, after staggering round a considerable length of town wall, he thought that he deserved a drink and pulled out his bottle, still unbroken. The English arrived soon afterwards, while he lay groaning in a ditch. They had the greatest difficulty and one or two casualties in obtaining entrance. Adriaen recovered later and reeled in with the last stragglers, babbling incoherently about Spanish sorties.

The defenders led him before de Leestmaller, with his hands bound, for they were suspicious. The streets of the town were almost empty, for every one was either on the walls or sleeping. Once or twice they passed a figure sprawling in the shadow, blood oozing through his clothes—someone who had received his death-wound on the walls and was dragging himself instinctively towards home; a common enough sight, Adriaen discovered later.

A little door at the bottom of a tower was opened to them, and they climbed up a circular stone stairway in pitch-darkness, Adriaen panting and protesting. At the top they were admitted to a small room lit by one light.

‘This man, sire, says he has an important message. Says the Spaniards are to make a sortie.’

‘I said nothing about the Spaniards, you fools! It’s the English—your deliverers—the English are coming!’

‘They ’ve come,’ muttered de Leestmaller.

‘What! Are you certain? Yes, by God, I did notice some. . . . Have you made the sortie, then?’

‘What sortie? Are the Spaniards. . . .’

‘God’s love! why will you talk about Spaniards?’

It's the English, I tell you! And Mijnheer Haddon, their captain, wants you to make a sortie.'

'But the English have come, man!'

'Then what are you arguing about? It's too late for the sortie, and my slowness has saved you a great deal of trouble. I had difficulty with cows. O God, I do feel ill!'

'Haddon is certainly the name. . . . What are you?'

'Poor lousy painter.'

'Talk sense, fellow! Are you with the English?'

'I was. Need I go on being a prisoner any more?'

'Loose him. He's mad, but harmless.'

De Leestmaller's voice was tired. Adriaen looked critically at a foreshortened view of his bony, hairless head, as he leant over the table, scratching at it with a dirty finger-nail. What he could see of his face was long, clean-shaven, pale green in this dim light, and gaunt with exhaustion.

'Have you any brandy?' Adriaen asked.

De Leestmaller shook his head.

'That is devoted entirely to the needs of the sick and wounded.'

'Well, I've been feeling sick all night, thanks to this queasy English ale, and these ropes have cut into my . . .'

'And you call that being wounded!'

'No.'

A woman's harsh voice had come out of the gloom on de Leestmaller's right. Adriaen peered, and made out a mountain ridge of a nose, two frowning bushy eyebrows, and eyes glaring at him like a cat.

'My wife,' explained de Leestmaller proudly.

'Wait,' she went on, 'until you have stood upon our walls on two stumps of legs, hurling down stones upon

the enemy with handless arms, and then talk to me of being wounded.'

'Well, until then, perhaps I may sit down. I'm tired.'

Adriaen flopped on to the floor, leant his head against the wall, and closed his eyes. Immediately he seemed to be whirling round and round. This English ale. . . . Then something held his nose like a vice and waggled it from side to side. He opened his eyes, brushed away the hand, and found that it belonged to Madame de Leestmaller. When she saw that he was awake she hobbled back with the help of a stick to her seat in the gloom.

Adriaen yawned till his jaws cracked and almost stuck apart.

'Plague take you! Why can't you let me sleep?'

'You must go,' said de Leestmaller. 'It is nearly light and my wife and I wish to sleep.'

'I'm moderately comfortable where I am, thanks.'

'Go at once!' Madame de Leestmaller's voice was compelling enough to bring Adriaen slowly to his feet, where he stood swaying and rubbing his eyes. 'Go to your English and tell them that I wish they had never set foot in Breda.'

'Oh, come, wife!' Adriaen noticed de Leestmaller's deferential familiarity. 'They will be useful. One or two hundreds more to man and repair the walls.'

'One or two hundreds more to feed.'

'They have brought welcome provisions with them.'

'Which will last a week.'

'Longer—if properly rationed.'

'The English are voracious eaters, and notoriously selfish. Oh, why did you let them in? I could wish

it had been a fine night, and the Spanish lines more closely drawn.'

'Wife, no one realizes more fully than I the worth of your services to our unfortunate town, but till the arrival of de Nassau, our people have placed their trust in me, and . . .'

'. . . and everything you have done rightly has been on my advice. God has inspired me to defend Breda against His enemies, who executed my brothers, and He speaks through my mouth. If He will . . .' She talked on and on. Adriaen did not listen. An odd couple, he thought, and so paintable. Both think they direct the defence of Breda. Both become defensively pompous when they argue. He is frightened of her, and she likes to think she wants him to have all the credit. She is also on excellent terms with the Almighty. They are interesting. I wonder if they'd have time to sit to me. . . .

'Er—Mevrouw . . .'

But she had ceased her tirade and was kneeling in prayer against the table, her stiff leg stretched out awkwardly. Her husband slept where he sat.

'Pray for me, Mevrouw. Oh, curse this English ale!'

Adriaen staggered down the winding stairway.

II

'Boy! Boy! If it isn't my beloved boy! Come here at once and let us all get drunk! Welcome to this plague-spot of a town!'

Adriaen jumped. He was standing in the doorway of a tavern, wondering how he was going to obtain drink without money. Yes; it was Jabbeke's voice, and there he stood, with arms raised in welcome above

his fiery head, and thinner cheeks, and more staring yellow eyes than ever. And there was Cwoop, too, portly and blinking; and Bladelin, breathing absorbedly into his flute, his white fingers twinkling—and others whom he did not know.

‘The sight of you is the first pleasant thing that has happened since we returned here, just before these Spanish swine arrived. Come to Jabbeke at once, and let me embrace you upon both cheeks!’

Adriaen succeeded in preventing this. Cwoop held out a hand with a podgy, genuine smile of welcome. Adriaen shook it, and then laid his on Bladelin’s shoulder. Bladelin jumped up, his green eyes shone, and he pressed Adriaen’s hands in his, too happy to speak.

‘Hoi there, hostess! Bring wine, and then more wine! Keep on bringing wine! It’s terrible stuff. They water it and water it, to make it last longer, and add to the price with each pint of water. Everything at all strong has been seized by that barber’s pole, de Leestmaller, for the use of the wounded. Nothing to eat, and only coloured water to drink. Why in hell’s name did you want to act your fatuous play in Breda, Cwoop?’

‘Still quarrelling, you two?’

‘Tell us your story, Adriaen, since Amsterdam,’ Jabbeke demanded.

‘I went to Haarlem, and there——’

‘Haarlem, yes. We thought of going to Haarlem, but somehow we didn’t. Visch said—by the way, you know that Visch died?’

‘No?’

‘Yes. Visch is roasting in hell now. I expect he’s being made to count red-hot coins. He died of the plague in Gouda. It’s a mercy none of the rest of us

caught it—especially Bladelin. We had to hold him back by force from going to nurse Visch.'

'The poor fellow died without the consolations of the Church,' Bladelin murmured.

'So the care of the company naturally devolved on me. And it had never been so prosperous, until Cwoop had to try his stinking play here, and they suddenly locked the gates on us. We 've been all over the Netherlands and even into Germany—but they liked us there about as much as they did at Amsterdam.'

Adriaen tried once more.

'Well, after that fight I was taken——'

'You 'll come and act with us again, Adriaen? We play every evening when there 's no alarm. Bladelin thought we ought to do nothing but fight, but I said no. It will keep up the spirits of the populace if they 've always some amusement. Of course we could not act Cwoop's play—too dull and serious. But I soon contrived a richly humorous comedy—and the people crowd to see it. It takes their minds off the empty rumblings of their stomachs. I 'll write in a part for you, Adriaen.'

'But I 'm a soldier now—an English soldier. That is, I 'm supposed to be. But I 'm seldom with them.'

'Oh, Adriaen,' Bladelin interrupted, 'aren't you a painter any longer?'

'Oh, yes. But this is a change. I don't believe in doing the same thing for too long. And have you fared well, Bladelin, without me to look after you?'

'I 'm happier here than ever before.'

'That 's good news.'

'I suppose you enjoy being slowly starved to death?' Jabbeke was scornful.

Bladelin shook his head with his slight smile.

'I think I understand,' said Adriaen. 'You enjoy a fight against the murderers of your beloved Stadholder William.'

Bladelin stared.

'How d' you remember these things about me?'
'I haven't so many real friends, you know, that—'

'Nonsense! Every man is your friend.'

'But not every woman! Besides, I'm only just a buffoon and a boozing companion.'

'That's not true. Every one—'

'Devil take it!' Jabbeke interrupted; 'just when I wanted to talk with Adriaen. . . .'

The deep urgent booming of a church bell was filling the room. Everybody started up and listened for a moment in silence. Then Bladelin, his eyes gleaming, his raised eyebrows wrinkling his forehead, yelled shrilly: 'The Spaniards! Come, the Spaniards!' and led a rush of men and women from the room.

'Hell's fury!' Adriaen muttered. 'Now I suppose I've got to go and fight.' And snatching up a jug of wine he ran out after the others.

The square was full of men and women running to the walls. They carried billhooks, fowling-pieces, axes, pistols, pump-handles, muskets, swords, bludgeons, carving-knives. There was little confusion. Every one seemed to know exactly where to go. The church bell was still ringing the alarm, calmly, sonorously, as if ringing them to service. Three cannon went off in quick succession. The bombardment had begun. They would batter away at the breach by the North Gate and then launch the attack. It was all very familiar, this alarm in the fading evening light. The defenders would go on repulsing the Spaniards, until one night they were attacked more heavily than usual, or were

defeated by sheer exhaustion, when the town would be sacked and burned and the inhabitants massacred, except for the women who would be violated and then massacred, and the leaders who would be tortured and then massacred—the usual thing. Meanwhile, they would fight on until strength failed them.

There was a heap of fallen masonry beneath the church tower, with a crushed body protruding from the wreckage. Adriaen looked up. The shapes of clanging bells were exposed, and part of a little room by the belfry. And there was the de Leestmaller woman sitting in a chair, clutching her stick, calmly looking out over the roofs and the walls towards the Spanish lines, as if half her dwelling-place had not been shot away. So that was where they had taken him on the night of his arrival. In a niche on a level with her he could see a large statue of the Virgin, disfigured, but still intact, also gazing in the same direction.

The bombardment was ferocious when he reached the North Gate. The defenders were waiting in a patient, silent crowd, ready to swarm into the breach. Splinters of stone flew through the air. Balls fell among the crowd. Those who were hit were carried away, otherwise no one moved. Some houses had been set alight near the gates, and the owners were desperately heaving furniture into the street. They must cling to their possessions, Adriaen thought, till the very end—which might be next moment. Shoutings, the roar of cannon, and the crackling of musketry came out of the devilish glow beyond the walls.

Adriaen soon found the others. Jabbeke was yawning, nervously cracking jokes. Bladelin waited, absently aloof, rusty old sword in hand. Cwoop anxiously sucked a finger. Adriaen offered his jug of

wine to Bladelin, who shook his head—then to Jabbeke and Cwoop. They drank deeply. The English company came swinging up, halting with unusual smartness, obviously determined to show off before all these foreigners. He wondered if he ought to join them. No; he would prefer to die, if necessary, with Bladelin and his own countrymen. However, he 'd much rather not die at all—life was far too amusing and intricate, and almost worth all this discomfort and stupid cruelty over creeds which no one could prove true or untrue.

Then de Leestmaller pushed through the crowd and stood out in front of them. A movement and a murmuring ran through the defenders. One or two hands were raised, and the English officers saluted him.

'He used to be cheered,' Jabbeke muttered. 'O Christ! I wish they 'd come!'

De Leestmaller began to address them, shouting across the din. Adriaen could not hear clearly and picked up his jug of wine. He didn't offer it to the others. Cannon balls continued to fall among the defenders, but now no one carried away the wounded. Bladelin, still in the same position, listened intently to de Leestmaller, tears running down his cheeks. Adriaen wondered at this emotion, and de Leestmaller's power to arouse it. How could people feel so strongly about such abstract matters?

In the middle of de Leestmaller's speech the bombardment suddenly ceased, and every one surged forward immediately to the gap in the walls. Adriaen was swept on with the rest, snatching up his jug just in time. There was a breach about thirty yards wide, from which the masonry had tumbled outwards, like a landslide, leaving a rough, steep slope, up which the first shouting attackers were already scrambling with pikes, muskets,

swords, or daggers between their teeth. Behind them were a line of torch-bearers and trumpeters blowing the assault on their long gilded trumpets, and a foppishly dressed officer, bearing in one hand a standard of crimson and yellow blazoned with the arms of Spain, and holding a lace handkerchief to his nose with the other—whether to advertise his contempt for his Dutch enemies, or to protect himself from the smell of his own soldiery or the stink of gunpowder, Adriaen could not decide. Behind the torch-bearers more men were beginning the ascent, and behind them again more torch-bearers and soldiers awaiting their turn, stretching as far as Adriaen's eye could penetrate the enclosing darkness. Scaling-ladders were being erected against the walls on either side of the breach. A widespread half-moon of sharpshooters supported the whole movement, spraying the walls with bullets and arrows. A general in black armour with yellow plumes in his helmet, on a shining black horse decorated with yellow ribbons, directed operations, surrounded by his glittering staff. It was one vast fan of brilliance and violent movement—a fan of fire, it seemed to Adriaen, fading gradually into the deep foreboding of the night; the dazzling embodiment of Spanish cruelty and Spanish power; a triumphant satanic pageant, against which this handful of half-starved Netherlanders, however desperately determined, seemed tragically inadequate. But it was a thrilling spectacle.

'By the blood, it 's marvellous!' Adriaen shouted.

'It 's devilish! The hosts of hell!' Bladelin was there beside him, calm, eager, clutching his old sword.

'Then Satan is to be congratulated.'

'The armies of the archangels fight with us.'

'And I 've no doubt the Spaniards are saying precisely

the same. Here's to their damnation, anyhow!—now when did I drink that toast before?’

As he brought down the jug from his lips, it suddenly shattered into pieces with a loud ping, leaving him only the handle.

‘Ho! So you'd dare to do that, would you?’ he shouted. ‘Take the remains, then!’

Adriaen flung the handle wildly. It struck an advancing pikeman in the eye. He yelped and overbalanced backwards, carrying others in his fall.

The first wave of Spaniards was upon them. They were destroyed in resolute silence. They had been doomed from the start and they knew it, and many of them fell without being touched, waiting until those in support had passed over them, then springing up again to the attack. Arrows and bullets flew high over the Spaniards and dropped into the massed defenders, who fell where they stood. Others stepped forward to take their places.

A fellow with staring black eyes came at Adriaen, mouthing ferociously. Then an arrow was sticking out of his neck with a little spurt of blood, and he had crumpled up at Adriaen's feet.

‘Thank you, somebody!’ Adriaen shouted. ‘I wanted a weapon.’

As he bent to pick up the fellow's pike, another was upon him, with open yelling mouth and a clubbed musket above his head. With a little jab Bladelin poked him in the stomach, and he turned a somersault, dislocating his neck.

‘Thanks, Bladelin!’ shouted Adriaen. ‘Musket or pike, which shall I choose?’

Bladelin was fighting like a fiend, his teeth stuck into his lower lip, a fixed grin on his mouth, a streak of

blood down one cheek, and his tow-coloured hair falling into his eyes. These mild fellows are the best fighters of all, Adriaen thought.

There came a short lull, while both sides heaved at the mound of corpses in between to give themselves more fighting space.

Adriaen wiped his forehead with the back of a blood-stained hand.

'I was just beginning to enjoy it!' he shouted to Bladelin; 'but this is dull. I'm going elsewhere.'

'I'm coming with you. Don't leave me.'

Adriaen pushed through to one side, away from the widest part of the breach. The English company were here, and in their forefront a gigantic man laying about him with a shrieking Spaniard grasped by the heels. God's truth! it was fun destroying all this bestial loveliness! Fifteen devils! A Spaniard on the wall—they were using the scaling-ladders. He was taking deliberate aim at the English. He'd fired, and someone had fallen. He was aiming again, unnoticed. Bladelin snatched up a stone and threw it. It struck the musket, luckily. The bullet pinged up into the air. The Spaniard overbalanced and fell. Adriaen raced for the ladder. A head and shoulders appeared over the wall as he reached it. He crashed his fist into the face, and it disappeared bloodily. He peered over. Bowed heads and backs all the way up the ladder from the ground—like a line of stupid, industrious ants. He and Bladelin seized the ends of the ladder, wrenched at its hooks, and pushed sideways. Shrieks, flying legs and arms patterned on the fiery air. A spatter of bullets from below, and something nicking the edge of his ear with a burning sensation. Another ladder further along the wall—its attacking party half-way up. 'Crouch

down and run along, Bladelin.' A quick peep over. A long line of stupid bowed heads and backs. Nearly up. Wait, wait, in chuckling anticipation. Suppose father were here? He would have stood permanently on the wall between the two forces, so as to belong to whichever side had the upper hand. S'blood! Man on the wall—he'd left it too late. Give him a push—over he goes with a yell—cartwheeling down, down. 'Get those hooks, Bladelin! Stave that swine's face in. Ends of the ladder. One, two, and away—it—goes!' Mind their bullets—crouch down. Bodies and legs sprawling on nothing—then spattered and writhing on the ground. Jesu! this was better than anything—better than booze, better than tobacco, better than skating—much, much better than women. 'Any more ladders, Bladelin?' Where's he gone? No more ladders yet. Where's Bladelin? Gone back?

He crept away, and then stood up. There was de Leestmaller, demented-looking, saliva dripping from his mouth.

'Thank you!' His voice was hoarse with shouting. 'Fine work! I was watching. Breda—proud of you!'

'Don't thank me, I've enjoyed it.'

'Come back to the breach! They're giving way. Every one's needed.'

'Yes, my commander!' Adriaen gave a burlesque salute and ran off.

He almost tripped over Jabbeke, sitting on the damp cobbles, bellowing like a baby, clasping a severed ear with both hands, between the fingers of which blood trickled.

'I'm dead! I'm dead!' he moaned when he saw Adriaen.

'Good. Keep me a warm place in hell.'

Adriaen ran on.

He passed Madame de Leestmaller, urging the defenders forward with her stick.

'Go and fight, you dirty coward!' she croaked at him.

'Certainly, you old strumpet!' he croaked back.

The Spaniards were spread fanwise inside the walls, and the defenders were forcing them slowly back. The burning houses and the Spanish torch-bearers lit up the fighting. The Spaniards still shouted as part of their soldiers' duty, but it had become rather half-hearted. Some, who could not reach the fighting, were picking out the defenders' dead and wounded, and clearing the ground a little by throwing them over the walls to be robbed and killed by their comrades below. Adriaen made out the standard-bearer, still with handkerchief to nose, standing beneath the torches.

Bladelin was there. His sword was red, his face pale, set, and exalted. As Adriaen came up to his side he was attacked by two men at once. Adriaen saw a swarthy face in front, and hit it with all his strength. It seemed to close up suddenly and its body toppled over on to the other man, whom Bladelin ran through the side. Adriaen borrowed his victim's pike.

'This is as easy as drinking!' Adriaen shouted, but Bladelin only nodded absently. 'Look out! Slip under his guard. . . . Oh, very pretty! The English are driving them back. Oh, and by the way, Jabbeke . . . I'll take the one with the face like a cow's udder. . . . There—how d' you like that, señor? As I was saying, Jabbeke's had his beauty spoiled. There's too many of these swine altogether. They must be as prolific as the Dutch. Look! You parry his blade and I'll let a little air into him. So. Excellently done! . . .

By God, we 're advancing! There are the English again! Fighting like the devils they are! The Spaniards are giving!

But Bladelin was sitting down, head in hands.

'Are you hurt?'

Bladelin lifted a white face, with tears in his eyes.

'No. Exhausted—and miserable.'

'Cheer up! They 're beaten now.'

An odd creature, Bladelin! Repenting the deaths he had caused, probably.

With a roar the English broke through on the flank. A knot of Spaniards were cut off and massacred. The rest were hurled down the breach. It was all over. There only remained to throw the Spanish dead over the walls, bury their own, carry off the wounded, prevent the fires from spreading, and build up the walls again. It was all over—until the next time. The only trouble was that there was almost nothing to eat.

III

The next day Adriaen was sent for by de Leestmaller, and climbed the stairway up to the belfry. Here he sat, dangling his legs over the edge where the wall of the room had been torn away, chewing a bitter root, and looking out towards the tents and pennons of the Spanish camp. It was a fresh windy morning, and the sun had little warmth. There was much glittering bustle beyond the walls, and he could see the enemy cooking over their fires.

De Leestmaller handed him a piece of paper.

'See the latest communication I have had from the Spanish commander.'

Adriaen read:

To the gallant defenders of Breda, from his most Catholic Majesty's most humble servant and general—Greetings. This day I have had for my breakfast three dozen oysters, a turbot fried in butter, a roasted haunch of meat, with divers jellies and fruits, washed down by a pint of the filthy meagre spittle which in your country does duty for wine. And you? . . .

'May it choke him!' Madame de Leestmaller muttered.

'The fellow has wit,' Adriaen said.

'How can the devil have wit?'

'One of his chief attributes, I should say. May I draw an obscene caricature and send it back for a reply?'

But de Leestmaller was pacing up and down, a protruding vein throbbing between his eyebrows.

'I have had another letter,' he said. 'De Nassau is coming here himself, but can promise neither food nor reinforcements. What are we to do? We cannot hold out much longer. The populace, staunch though they are, clamour to me for food, and I can't give them any. . . . Yet Spinola has a reputation for clemency—'

'The Spanish shall not take the town!' his wife interrupted fiercely. 'I have sworn it. You have a faint heart, but the people haven't. However, they look to you, and if you are cowardly, they will be. Can we give in when so many towns have held out against them? I tell you I will die before I see the town surrendered to my brothers' murderers.'

'They will take Breda, anyhow,' Adriaen put in. 'And they're far more likely to be merciful, if—'

'That is a coward's reasoning.'

'I am a coward. It's only common sense.'

'You admit to cowardice?'

'He is no coward,' her husband said. 'I watched him last night. He is a brave man. That is why I sent for him—to reward his bravery. I was forgetting. Here, Brouwer, take this pearl. If you ever leave this place alive, it may be of use.'

He took a ring from his finger. Adriaen examined it with delight.

'Thank you. It is a lovely pearl. But I can't take it.'

'Why not?'

'I enjoyed that little fight. What I did I did for my own amusement. Besides, I was half drunk.'

De Leestmaller looked hopefully at the pearl. He liked to reward bravery, but he was deeply attached to the ring. He was nonplussed.

'But you must take it.'

'No. As your wife says, I am a coward.'

'But, I—de Leestmaller—defender of Breda, offer it to you.'

'And I, Brouwer, poor lousy painter, offer it back.'

He held it out on the flat of his hand.

'He doesn't deserve it,' Madame de Leestmaller croaked.

'Very well, then,' said Adriaen; 'if none of us wants it, it may as well go out into the street to console some wench for her empty stomach.'

And he drew back his hand to throw it out.

'No!' the de Leestmallers shouted simultaneously, and the husband made a grab. Next moment he was self-consciously slipping it on to his finger again.

'Well, that's settled!' Adriaen smiled. 'And now have I your gracious permission to withdraw?'

'Yes, go!' snarled the wife.

'Before I go I'd like to give you my advice,' said Adriaen.

'We don't need your advice.'

Adriaen ignored her.

'My advice is—surrender.'

'No!' shouted Madame de Leestmaller.

'Either surrender, or cut your way out. Be tortured here, or surrounded and cut to pieces by the enemy's cavalry. An interesting choice.'

'An impossible decision,' groaned de Leestmaller.

'You know, all this fuss is incomprehensible to me,' Adriaen went on. 'What can it matter which way you worship God?'

'The man is a blasphemer!' Madame de Leestmaller croaked, and chewed her nails.

'And all this patriotism! The rich will oppress the poor, and the rulers will squeeze what they can out of the ruled, whether Holland is governed by Dutch or Spanish . . .'

'And he is a traitor! Throw him down from the tower!'

'. . . though I admit the Spaniards are vile. I'd certainly rather pay my taxes into a Dutchman's pocket than a Spaniard's.'

De Leestmaller had not been listening.

'It's the people. I can't help thinking of the poor, starving people. Die of starvation, or die of the Spaniards. Yet they may show mercy. . . . It's a terrible decision for one man to make.'

'And it has to be made for you by a woman.'

'Ah, wife, if only we all possessed your spirit! I am terrified for the people and for myself, and yet I have to go about cheerful and confident.'

'Face it,' Adriaen urged gently. 'Face it. You know you really believe that the Spaniards will be merciful. The real defender of Breda sits over there in the corner, biting her nails and spitting. Your

real decision is not between starvation and the Spaniards, but between your conscience and your fear of your vengeance-obsessed wife.'

De Leestmaller glowered. 'How dare——' he began, but his wife cut him short.

'Obsessed with vengeance, you call it, with the memory of my brothers——'

'Oh, go on biting your nails! The memory of your brothers has been responsible for enough deaths to satisfy even you!'

She hobbled at him with her stick.

'You sneer your way into our councils with your foul subversiveness, and——'

'Wait, wife. He may be right. Oh! I don't know what to think! All my life I have unconsciously obeyed you. But now others are concerned—perhaps——'

'Then here's your chance,' Adriaen interrupted.
'Just look down here.'

'What d' you mean, Brouwer?'

Some people, seeing movements at the top of the tower, had stopped to gaze up, and for the past few minutes a little crowd had been collecting below, quite spontaneously. Adriaen had been watching them. Seeing folk gaping up, others naturally came and gaped too, waiting for something to happen. The crowd slowly increased, and seeing de Leestmaller, raised a rather dismal cheer. He stood there uncertain, the vein throbbing in his forehead.

Then a woman at the back shouted: 'Food!' The crowd took it up. 'Food! Give us food!' The cry swelled into a roar, and more and more people appeared. If that woman had shouted 'cooking-pots!' or 'tabby-cats!' Adriaen reflected, the others would have taken it up just as vehemently. De Leestmaller listened with

tears on his cheeks. Suddenly he stepped right to the edge and held up his hand. There was immediate and hopeful silence.

'My people,' he shouted down, 'I have no food! If I had food, how willingly would I give it you! I will gladly throw myself down from this tower, and you can divide up my body and eat it.'

'No!' muttered the crowd, on a deep humming note.
'No, no, no!'

'I believe myself that the enemy would be merciful to us, but no one can be sure. Are you prepared to run the risk of——'

His wife suddenly hobbled up, pulled him back and stood at the edge.

'You a traitor, too! Let me talk to them! Listen to me, down there!' Her voice crackled as if she were discharging musketry at them. 'Our countrymen have been torn to pieces on the rack, tortured in innumerable fiendish ways, burned at the stake. My own brothers' heads were hacked off, and the rest of my family forced to look on. And you would prefer to endure this rather than the pangs of hunger? Shall it be said in years to come . . .'

Adriaen turned his mind elsewhere. What an old tigress it was! No wonder her husband was dominated. Poor, tortured creature! He would have thrown himself down into the street without a moment's thought, would readily have parted with his pearl, and was naïvely pleased when neither sacrifice was demanded of him. A leader, yet without self-confidence. A man of sympathy, suffering even more for his people than for himself, having to force himself to force them to endure. The right man in the right place in the right circumstances, who realized his rightness, and loathed

it. Moreover, he had a fine head, and . . . But, God in heaven! De Leestmaller was standing beside his wife, one hand behind the small of her back, his arm trembling, eyes starting out of his head, breathing stertorously. But it was only a momentary madness. He felt Adriaen's eyes on him, and began gently patting his wife's back as if in praise. Adriaen looked quickly away, pretending that he had noticed nothing.

The crowd were cheering Madame de Leestmaller's every sentence. They must be great fools, he thought, to be moved by her patriotic clap-trap. Yet there was something fine in her ferocious single-mindedness.

'Go!' she was barking at them now, like a shaggy, infuriated dog. 'Go! About your duties! Let 's have no more of this paltry spirit among you!'

And they cheered her and went obediently away.

IV

Saliva dribbled continuously from Adriaen's mouth, and his stomach kept up a steady rumbling. At first this was funny, and he challenged his friends to out-rumble him. Later his stomach began to contain a frozen yellow emptiness, which seemed to have swelled and congealed a little more each morning when he woke up. The most watered wine made him drunk, and he accordingly blessed the siege for his cheap orgies. At the same time he found that he was quite incapable of taking anything seriously. Even the grimdest tragedies and the cruellest sufferings, which would have generally moved him deeply, made him giggle and then feel guilty. And the fate of Breda held as much interest for him as the next cock-fight in the English camp. With all this came a craving for paint—a craving not

only to lay paint on canvas, but also for great lumps of glowing colour, which he could crunch between his teeth, or mix with oil and chew like some glutinous sweetmeat. For the first time he wanted to paint a still-life picture—a composition of poetic gluttony. His imagination rioted with red lobsters, pale gold pomegranates, their insides saturated with blood, with peacocks as ornate in cooked death as in strutting life, with swollen purple grapes and tall glasses of yellow wine—all of them smelt, tasted, and touched with curious vividness.

There were no cats left in Breda. No dogs, no rats, no mice, no birds—but plenty of insects, and the horses belonging to the English, under a heavy guard. Adriaen asked an Englishman why they did not have a good horse stew to put some strength into their bodies. He answered: ‘Good God, man, we aren’t cannibals!’ Fortunately there was no lack of water, leaves, roots, bark, leather, flowers, and paper. Wine was running short, and when it had gone the siege would be over as far as Adriaen was concerned. And each day de Leestmaller received a detailed account of the Spanish commander’s meals.

Ghosts of men and women shuffled resolutely through the sunny streets. Many collapsed quite suddenly, especially when it was hot, and were carried away to their houses if they were still alive; if not, to the huge burial pit in the waste ground, where men grubbed for roots. There was fear of an outbreak of plague. The cries of insufficiently suckled children sounded day and night.

Each afternoon, as the days grew longer, Jabbeke brought his players into action in the square near the tower. His wound—in the front, and sustained in

action against his country's oppressors—seemed to bring out the best in Jabbeke, though his bandage remained round his ear long after it was healed. He had become a rabid patriot, in spite of Adriaen's sarcasms, swore he would never surrender, volunteered for the most dangerous jobs, and caught the eye of Madame de Leestmaller, who always had a special, and toothless, smile for him. The performances were announced by a crier, and the audience sat or lay on the cobble-stones in sunshine or rain, with their weapons beside them. Madame de Leestmaller had been against this frivolity. But Jabbeke had replied: 'By the good God, dear lady' (he always called her 'dear lady,' and she loved it), 'by the good God, it will put heart into your people and take their minds off their bellies.' And Jabbeke had produced such a coarse and blasphemous performance that she had walked away disgusted. But the people were delighted with it. They came every evening, even though it was always exactly the same. They laughed and clapped as far as they had strength. And Adriaen, from his position among the actors, was fascinated by the sight of hundreds of ragged skeletons opening their mouths and shaking with almost silent laughter, while their applause was as loud as rain pattering on leaves. Bladelin would take no part. He kept watch on the walls, with his flute and sword, brooding over the tyrants below. When the audience rose at the end of the performance, some still lay there. The ringing of the alarm bells generally interfered with the action of the play.

It was an Englishman who first gave the word. He had peeped into the back window of a house, seeing through a crack between curtains a darkened room,

a candle, a table piled with all sorts of foods, cupboards running over with more, and men and women gobbling furtively. The English officers withdrew to consult together. The man did not wait. He called to his friends. Adriaen was with them. The word 'food' went round like lightning, and they were off at once, mouths slobbering. Adriaen called to every one he passed, and the crowd swelled. Looking back he had a comic view of white, set, irregularly bobbing faces.

They were led through narrow winding streets to the Jewish quarter, and stopped at last before a ramshackle house with a cross scratched on its thick oak door. They banged on the door, rattled the handle, and shouted. It was heavily barred and there was no answer. Someone heaved a stone and smashed in part of the window. An old man, with popping eyes and a skull-cap, came to the window to protest. He received another stone full in the face and fell out of sight. Their guide was through like an eel, tearing his clothes on the jagged glass. Adriaen followed, before the fight for places at the window began. He found himself in a little, bare room. An old woman and a young red-haired girl were whimpering in a dark corner.

'Away, quick!' Adriaen shouted to them, 'or you'll be torn to pieces and then eaten!'

They scuttled out, and Adriaen went to unbar the street door.

The shambles began. All the other windows were smashed. Some climbed up on to the roof to break their way in. Loaves of bread were fought over, half eaten. Sausages were pulled out of other people's mouths, like gulls snatching fish from other gulls' beaks. Cheeses were trampled under-foot, men and

women went down on their knees to scrape up the remnants, and were kicked unconscious. Others secreted lumps of raw meat in their clothes and tried to fight their way out. Whole, uncooked, rancid fish were crammed into mouths, bones and all. Necks of bottles of wine and sauces were broken, and the contents drunk, snatched away, drunk again, unmindful of floating bits of glass, half of it running down chins, beards, and clothes. Even candles were chewed. Men gobbled, fought, vomited, clawed, yelled, grew purple and choked, tore at chunks of food with teeth and nails. The noise was like a battle, the heat and stench appalling. In a very few minutes everything edible had disappeared, and the still hungry ranged through the little house smashing cupboards, tearing up floor-boards. Outside there were still more people trying to fight their way in. The Jewess and her daughter cowered at the end of the little courtyard at the back. The owner of the house lay trampled unrecognizable in his front room.

Adriaen had been lucky enough to snatch up a lump of cold cooked meat and some raw onions, and slip out through a back window. He ran through the courtyard and out into a deserted street. Here he sat down and ate. Nothing had ever tasted so delicious. When he had eaten and slept he walked back through the Jew's courtyard. There was a large rent in the roof of the house. He climbed on a water-butt, heaved himself up, and peeped in. It looked as if quantities of gunpowder had been exploded there. Men and women lay groaning and twitching in the mess on the floor. Some of the faces were hardly human. A man, with stupid staring eyes and a long bloody gash across his forehead, leant against the door, silently opening

and shutting an enormous mouth. A pair of legs stuck out from under a heavy cupboard torn from the wall.

The Jewess came tiptoeing in with dishevelled hair and little tight sobs. She gazed round and burst into shrill, uncontrolled laughter. Adriaen slid down off the roof and walked quickly away.

V

Unable to sleep, Adriaen often mounted guard at night. That is to say he found a deserted place, where attack was unlikely owing to the height of the wall, and the scarcity of Spaniards below, and lay down flat on the top, gazing at the dark emptiness of the sky, intensely conscious from hunger of every noise and smell, of the hard outlines of the stones in his back, and of the least change in the shape of the clouds or the position of the stars. His mind as a rule was a jumble of memories more or less vivid, or a series of ideas for pictures, complete in every detail, presenting themselves distinctly and separately—and then the agony of being without brush or paints overcame the agony of being without proper food.

One night as he lay there he heard voices near him. With a start, he became conscious of the world again, and raised himself on his elbow to listen. A girl's voice spoke, low, tender, and rough.

'It's quiet here, Jan, and sheltered in this nook.'

Jan's voice answered—thin, but almost musical:

'I wish I'd thought of this place before.'

'Hold me close, Jan. The wall makes a hard pillow, and one feels the cold with an empty belly.' A sigh, then: 'That's comfortable.' A silence. The man's voice:

'It's easier now for you to slip out?'

'Yes. My mother keeps to her bed. We give her what we can find to eat. But she won't last long.'

'A blessing, Marie.'

'Yes; God and His holy angels will receive her.'

'I bless the Spaniards in that way. I can be with you each night now. Some good's come from the siege.'

'Oh, Jan, but what will happen when we surrender?'

'We won't, my sweet. And if we do, we'll die in each other's arms—you and me. But let's not think of that. We've good times coming to us, Marie.'

A silence, then:

'Put your hand in my bosom, Jan. Like you did that first time—down by the stream.' A sigh. 'Ah, that's comfortable. I wish I had your hands on me always, Jan. They're so comforting.'

'I wish you did, my sweet.'

'Oh, it's all so hard, Jan!' A little sob.

'Hush, hush, Marie. Don't cry! Heindrick's sister started crying the other day and she couldn't stop. A devil must have got hold of her.'

'Yes, the Spaniards do send devils into the town. But I expect it was just the hunger. It makes you like that.' A tired, coy note. 'Oh, Jan, there I go again, being mournful! Kiss me, to show you aren't angry with me.'

'My little Marie.'

Silence.

'How the rain pattered down that evening by the stream! D' you remember, Jan?'

'And you got so wet that you were sneezing for weeks after.'

'It was your fault. You wouldn't let me go home.'

'I know, Marie. But it seemed I should never be so happy again as when I first knew that we loved. I wanted it to go on.'

'It was worth the cold.'

'Then that evening in the hay field. . . .'

'Oh, Jan! . . .'

A long kiss.

'You drank such a lot of cider.'

'It made me quite tipsy—horrid!'

'You were funny!'

'And then you insisted on carrying me home, because you said I was too drunk to walk straight.'

'I enjoyed that.'

'Jan, we might get drunk again. It would help us to bear our sufferings.'

'There's no wine left.'

Adriaen almost sprang up off the wall. . . .

Another night they had three raw potatoes. Jan had been saving them up to share with Marie. Adriaen listened enviously to munching, longing to jump down and beg some. But he gathered from their remarks and sounds that Jan was giving them all to Marie, and only pretending to eat his share. Besides, these two voices in the dark intrigued him. He hoped he would never see their owners, for he already had his own vivid picture of them, and was not going to risk disillusionment. And he wanted to hear more of their past happiness.

Marie said gently: 'Please put your hand—there, Jan.' A sigh, then: 'That's so comforting.' Then a long, contented silence, with a distant rumbling of cannon. Adriaen was almost asleep when he heard:

'I shall buy Heindrick's little farm when we're married, Marie.'

'And give up the cobbling! What would your father have said?'

'I don't know. When he lay in my arms after the Spaniards had got him, he said: "Keep the shop going, son. If the worst comes to the worst you can always chew the leather." I'm glad he didn't live to see his words come true.'

'But you oughtn't to disobey his last wishes.'

'I know; but you've always said you'd like to live on a farm. I'll buy some cattle.'

'Jan, you're so good to me! I could make the cheeses and look after the poultry, while you worked in the fields.'

'I dare say we'd make a living.'

'I dare say.'

A silence. Two deep sighs. . . .

Adriaen fought hard against his affection for Jan and Marie. He called himself a sentimental fool, and them pathetic cowards for trying to drug their miseries with memories and impossible hopes. The affection remained. He kept his ears pricked for their kisses. He pictured the semi-innocent, puppy-like gambollings of their love-play when they recalled them. He smiled at the absurd intimate jokes of which they reminded each other in always feebler and feebler voices. He knew that he would be utterly bored by five minutes of their company, yet he could not get them out of his mind day or night. He was furious with himself, and blamed his bodily weakness for this failure to keep his resolution never to become too deeply involved in other people's lives, especially women's. And now this love business—the insipid affair of two peasants—had caught him up all over again.

Then, apparently, Jan's friend Heindrick—a meaty-faced great oaf, Adriaen imagined him—had been captured by the Spaniards, trying to smuggle food into the town. His head had been cut off and paraded before the walls on a pike. Jan was in very low spirits, and Marie, trying to comfort him, could do nothing but sob; so that Jan had to comfort her, and Marie's form of comfort was unexpectedly successful.

'I'll never get Heindrick's farm now,' said Jan. 'Never mind, there are others, though his would have suited us. And he was willing to sell cheaply, for he wanted to come into the town. Well, he's come into the town once too often. Poor old Heindrick!'

'We shall never have anything of our own now, Jan—not even a grave.'

'Marie, you mustn't talk like that! Relief may come. . . .'

'No. We may as well face it, Jan. There's no hope. Oh, let's just stay here in each other's arms until we die.'

'No, Marie. We've got to help to defend our town.'

'What's the use? It's only a question of hours.'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

'We've not had much joy in our lives. Let's at least die happy.'

'And go to hell for the selfish cowards we are.'

'I suppose you're right, Jan. You always are. I am so feeble.'

'You are my sweet.'

'Oh, Jan, I'm so feeble—so feeble!'

'My sweet!'

Adriaen wondered whether he should jump down

and stab them both to the heart, here and now. It would be the greatest kindness he could do them. He had his dagger. He would bid them lie close to each other, their lips touching and their eyes shut. . . . But he could not make up his mind to it. Perhaps after all the town would be relieved, and they would have lost their chance of happiness. This cursed hunger had sapped his power of decision. Silly, sentimental fool to worry about their unhappiness. . . .

A few nights later only one came. He sat for some time in silence. Adriaen wondered what had happened to Marie. Then Jan stood up. Adriaen could see his head and chest above the darkness of the wall, against the fainter darkness of the thin moonlight. He stood looking down towards the lights of the main Spanish camp. Then he suddenly scrambled up on to the wall, and jumped. Adriaen saw him for a few seconds turning over and over, before he was swallowed up by the darkness below. Then there was a thud. Then Adriaen was lying across the wall, his head dangling over the edge, sobbing and sobbing. . . .

VI

Adriaen felt that he must fetch Jan's body, so that he might be buried beside his countrymen. And now that they were both dead, he wanted to see the fellow whose commonplace love had had power to move him. The body lay below the wall, sprawling face downwards, and Adriaen kept watch above, trying to laugh himself out of his mawkishness. But a foreign corpse was of no interest to the few Spaniards who passed by that way, and his resolution held.

He procured some lengths of rope, and as soon as it

was growing dark he made one end fast inside the wall, threw the other end over, and slithered down, burning his hands with the friction. He turned the thin body over. The features seemed to have been almost obliterated by the fall and were blotched with dry blood. He shrugged his shoulders, and was about to tie the body to the end of the rope, wondering if he would have strength to climb it again and then pull Jan up from the top, when he heard a voice singing beautifully a strange song in a strange language. He lay down beside the body. The song came nearer and stopped. There was a volley of belches. Then a new song began. Adriaen enjoyed listening, but he wanted to get back inside the walls. It would take him some time. Besides, there might be other Spaniards about. But the song did not move, and it went on and on. A new song began, interrupted by hiccups, still from the same place. Adriaen crawled forward, peered, and made out a man lying a few yards away. He crawled still nearer. The man stopped singing, and put something large up to his mouth. It looked like a bottle. Then the song went on again. Should he kill him first? Adriaen wondered. Here was a chance not to be missed, and supposing he had some food with him! No. It would be a real sin to kill a drunkard—especially with a voice like that. Drunkenness transcended all creeds, all religions, all nationalities. Drunkenness was the only true brotherhood of men.

‘Hi, there!’ he tried cautiously.

The song broke off, and there was silence. Then a belch, and the song began again.

‘Hi, there!’—louder this time.

The man sat up swaying and let out a spate of unintelligible words.

'Talk sense,' Adriaen interrupted. 'I'm Dutch.'

To his great surprise the answer came back in passable Dutch. 'I am talking sense! I'm telling you I'm the chief musician to the general, with a voice like the rich wine of Spain, and I can't get anything to drink in your foul land, except rancid brandy and filth like dish-water. Moreover, I am—'

'Did you—did you say—brandy?'

'Yes, I said brandy.'

'You haven't—you haven't—any there?'

'Yes—I have some here! Filth it is, too. Hic!'

'You wouldn't—give me some?'

'Why should I? You are my enemy. Yet I have a voice like running water, and my daughter has a baby, which . . .'

'Tell me about your daughter's baby,' said Adriaen, standing up and approaching.

'I had a letter from Valladolid to-day—the first for —hic—three months. The little one must be three months old, for my wife wrote at once. She has eyes like mine—the little one, I mean, for the wife has eyes like a cockatrice—and . . .'

The brandy bottle was held loosely by one hand on the ground. It was easy to withdraw it gently. It was paradise to feel the liquid burning its way through his empty stomach. Adriaen replaced it soon. Not too much at first, the fellow must be humoured. Adriaen peered closely at him. His nose had been battered out of shape, and he had the bushiest black beard Adriaen had ever seen. He could not make out any more details.

'. . . one is not a grandfather every day. So to-night I am celebrating a three-months-old event.'

'My felicitations, grandfather. And how long is it since you saw your dear wife?'

'Ah, my dear wife. She has the eyes of a cockatrice and the face of an adder. Thirteen years.'

'Thirteen years? That is a long time. And why is that?'

'I have been fighting in your God-forsaken country or elsewhere. My daughter was seven when I last saw her, and I have a voice of—hic—liquid satin. Have some brandy?'

'Thank you.'

Adriaen drank deeper this time. A glorious warm content began to settle over his body. This was luck, by God!

'You are my enemy. I ought to stick you in the guts with my dagger—only—only I seem to have lost the thing. And I offer you brandy instead. I am a saint as well as a singer of merit.'

'You are. May God bless you! I drink to your health.'

'Wait! Don't take it all!'

He snatched at the bottle and missed. Adriaen finished his gulp and handed it back.

'You speak our language well.'

'I am a man of intelligence. I have been in your God-forsaken country on and off for thirteen years. How should I not speak your language—harsh and brutal though it is? Now the language of Spain is musical and luscious, like my voice. Hark to this.'

And he declaimed some lines of what was evidently poetry in a booming voice.

'Is that not delicious?'

'Delicious.'

'That is what I call a language—not a grunting of

beasts like yours. And suitably so—for your people are beasts, grovelling in the low-lying mud flats of your God-forsaken land. When I kill a Dutchman I feel no more compunction than in slaying a—hic—boar. But you are brave and obstinate devils, and we can be merciful to brave enemies. Have some brandy ?'

'You are being merciful to this one.'

Adriaen drank.

'You seem reasonably sensible for a Fleming.'

'I am a painter, a poet, a musician, an actor—and a drunkard. You are generous, a brave warrior, the best singer in all Europe, and a grandfather. It is absurd that we are enemies. Let me drink again to your health and happiness and that of your children and grandchildren.'

The Spaniard handed over the bottle.

'Don't drink it all. I like you. I will sing to you, so that you may forget your miserable circumstances for a few moments of bliss.'

'Do!'

His voice floated up into the night—light and pleasant and curiously high for so warlike and hirsute a face. Adriaen lay back and closed his eyes. Immediately he seemed to be whirling round and round, up and down. He did not mind. He felt burningly and idiotically happy. . . .

When he woke up it was beginning to grow light. He slowly ungummed his eyes, and worked out where he was. Then he sat up quickly, feeling ill. Something slid off his stomach. He looked down—it was a piece of meat, and by his side was the brandy bottle. The Spaniard had gone.

He ate and drank, and, feeling stronger, staggered to the wall and began to climb. He had to rest several

times on the way up, clinging to the rope with aching arms and seething stomach. An arrow followed him over the top of the wall. Crouching down, he hauled in the rope. Then he remembered Jan's body. . . .

VII

The Spanish commander was tired of the siege. The weather was hot and airless, there were many corpses still unburied, and he did not want an outbreak of plague among his troops. Moreover, there was a maid-of-honour in a distinguished household in Brussels, who had also resisted his power, and he wished to undertake this other, more attractive siege. So he was not content to let starvation do his work for him.

The defenders could not keep pace with the destruction of their walls, and each day the Spaniards came almost gaily to the attack, expecting to make short work of them. But they were still met with a desperate resistance. The defenders fought on, till they died and could lay aside their miseries with relief. The happy expressions on the faces of their dead caused fear and wonder among their enemies. De Nassau had arrived. The de Leestmallers were always there, she goading him on, he goading his people and himself, the haunted look on his face reflecting the conflict within him. His wife was fiercely happy in her obsession. The Spaniards were superstitiously in awe of her, and called her 'the Dutch she-devil.'

This morning they had battered away most of the North Gate. Adriaen had deserted the English as usual. They had paid him nothing, and were going to fight their way out of the town, if possible to-night. They were surly and mutinous, for they realized that they

were fighting on the losing side and there was no chance of plunder. So Adriaen stood above the gate against a threatening sky, with Bladelin and Jabbeke, hurling lumps of masonry on to the enemies' heads.

It was very close, and the sweat ran off their emaciated bodies. Only Jabbeke had much energy left. He screamed abuse with each stone he flung. He shouted encouragement to those below. He postured up there on the wall, enjoying himself hugely, Adriaen suspected —real life having once again supplied the perfect background for his acting, as before in the fight at Amsterdam. Or was he genuine? Adriaen was too weak and tired to think. Bladelin, having no weapon and little physical strength, was fighting with prayer. He knelt rather sideways on the slope, eyes closed, hands clasped, lips moving, face white and calm. And the actions of neither of his friends, Adriaen thought, would affect the foregone result in the least. They would live only in his own memory for a short time as something to smile at. . . .

He heard a shriek behind him. He scrambled round, and Bladelin opened his eyes. A Spaniard was on the wall. He had Jabbeke in his arms—Jabbeke, with yellowed eyes wide in terror, shrieking mouth, the scrubby red hair on his face a-prickle. For a second Adriaen saw him as he had seen him first in the Oudenaarde tavern. Then he and Bladelin made a rush. But the Spaniard was too quick, and Adriaen only caught a glimpse of Jabbeke's flaming hair and spread-eagled arms as they disappeared below the top. Then he and Bladelin were both in the Spaniard's arms. However, he remembered his dagger, and the Spaniard went down after Jabbeke. They tottered back, and Bladelin was

praying for the repose of Jabbeke's soul, his body shaken with feeble sobs. Adriaen lay against the wall, numbed and gulping.

So Jabbeke was gone, and his going had been inglorious. He might have been allowed a genuinely heroic death with a second or two of leisure to appreciate it. Another mean trick on life's part. Adriaen stood up and shook Bladelin.

'Come on. Away from here!'

Bladelin rose and followed him. They went to join the others, before the hordes piling themselves up, dead and alive, in the narrow gateway.

Heavy, cooling drops began to fall, which soon thickened to a downpour, splashing off the helmets and breastplates of the Spaniards, soaking into the inert bodies of the dead and wounded, running down sweaty faces into parched mouths. The storm seemed to put new life into the defenders. The rain soon penetrated to their hot, emaciated bodies, reviving them, while the Spaniards were sheltered by their armour, which shut in the heat. Their officers, too, looked anxiously at their bright silks—after all, this town was ripe for their plucking any time now; any day was good enough, so why spoil good clothes? The ground began to churn up into mud, and the Spaniards were the heavier on their feet.

The storm had certainly made a new man of Bladelin. His lustreless eyes blazed. He pushed his way to the front, followed by Adriaen, shouting: 'God is fighting on our side! He is raining manna down upon us, as He did upon the Israelites of old!' People round him took up the cry. 'God is with us! He is raining manna down for us!' Many, apparently, believed it. 'God is with us!' became a general war-cry, infusing

everywhere a fresh fanaticism. They began to press the Spaniards back through the gateway. Adriaen heard a shouted song just in front, and saw a man with a battered nose and huge bushy black beard hewing his way forward contentedly, almost absent-mindedly. He recognized the singing grandfather of the other night. An axe was raised above his head, and Adriaen shouted to him. Then the song stopped with a shriek, and the axe fell from flabby fingers, and the defenders advanced over grandfather's writhing body.

Adriaen knelt at his side. Blood oozed out, tarnishing his armour.

'Grandfather! Grandfather!' Adriaen shouted. One brown eye opened, staring, glazed, and bloodshot.

'Grandfather!'

Semi-consciousness flooded into the eye, and the mouth widened into a half-smile.

'Thank you for that food!' Adriaen shouted. 'I didn't kill you. It wasn't me. If I come out of this alive, I'll go to Spain and see your granddaughter and tell her what a fine fellow her grandfather was, and how he had the loveliest voice in all Europe!'

The half-smile was becoming fixed.

'I'll tell your wife how you fought like a lion and died singing. I'll tell her how you were kind to a poor Dutch devil, the night you celebrated your grandchild's birth. . . .'

But the brown eye was stupid and fish-like. The bushy black beard was rain-sodden. Grandfather would never lose that half-smile, until the flesh rotted from his skull.

Adriaen stood up. Jan and Marie, Jabbeke, grandfather. . . . Hell was on earth! To the devil belonged war, bravery, cruel senseless creeds and patriotism!

He would leave Breda with the English. Paint, drink, smoke. He ran after Bladelin, and dragged him away from the fight by the scruff of his neck, out through the advancing defenders. Passing Madame de Leestmaller with her brandished stick, he treated her to a stream of blistering obscenities.

CHAPTER XI

SELF-PORTRAIT

I

ADRIAEN sat in the bows of the fishing boat, his feet dangling over the edge. There was little breeze to fill her dirty yellow sails, and only by looking down at the procession of shining bubbles could he tell that she was moving. The sun beat a smell of tar from her sides, though a salt freshness came up to him from below. Sea and sky were the colour of an oyster. It was impossible to tell which was sea and which sky, except where a thin dark line of land held out wide arms to them. One or two ships looked like tired ghosts on the pale satin brilliance of the water.

Bladelin lay behind him with his head on a coil of rope, eyes closed, lips moving through a defensive, maudlin smile. Adriaen looked back at him sometimes, and then forward again with relief to the quiet, scintillating, opal world ahead, where, it seemed, nothing could ever happen again.

He was worried about Bladelin. This obsession with the years-old death of the Stadholder William had grown worse since the siege. Defeat and physical weakness had undermined his brain. Adriaen loathed all obsessions, whether that of a priest-haunted Spanish monarch, whose craving for personal salvation cost so many lives a minute, or that of Madame de Leestmaller, the death of whose brothers had prolonged the futile sacrifices and empty bellies of Breda. Intense single-

mindedness simply invited frustration at the hands of someone whose purpose transcended yours. Cornelia had taught him his lesson. Fortunately Bladelin's rabidity was turned in against himself. He was filled with a swollen self-pity at his imagined failure properly to avenge the great William. He had wanted to stay with the defenders. He would not surrender to the Papist murderers of the father of the fatherland. He would revel in their tortures, and each second of agony would be an expiation for the bullets which had passed through that great man's body. And he had allowed Adriaen to drag him away on the night when the English cut their way out of Breda. And then de Nassau had surrendered the place. . . . So much Adriaen had gathered from his prattle—and much more about frustrated passions, a harsh mother, and a brother who was delicate, beautiful, and beloved, and who appeared to have betrayed his parents to the Inquisitors.

Adriaen remembered little of the night on which they had at last left Breda, after what seemed a lifetime. Perhaps exhaustion had weakened his brain also. He remembered sheltering behind an Englishman, clutching Bladelin's arm; an agonizing time when they had had to repulse a squadron of Spanish cavalry; the Englishman leaping up to tear a Spaniard out of his saddle; mounting the horse, heaving Bladelin up behind, and pricking it forward, anywhere away from Breda. Next morning they had literally fallen from their horse by the roadside, where a farmer was milking his cows in the chilling dawn. He had let them lie underneath the udders, whilst he milked into their open mouths. As they rode south away from the Spanish armies and more or less regular food renewed their strength,

Adriaen had felt a new swelling of power within him, but Bladelin became more and more listless. Adriaen had even scrounged a flute—Bladelin had lost his during the siege—but the playing of it merely produced tears. Adriaen did not dare let him out of his sight, which was annoying as he wanted to drink.

Then, quite suddenly, had come the desire to see his mother again. He felt incompetent to deal with Bladelin, but she was wise and would be sympathetic. Besides, he wanted to know how she had fared all this time. They started south for Oudenaarde.

He found his mother sitting on the same stool in the same little shop in the same street. She was bent over her needlework, and did not look up at first when he stepped down over the threshold. She hardly recognized him until he had kissed her—then she wept, while he held her in his arms wondering that any one should care so much about his return. Anna had altered. Her hair was white as a cloud, though discoloured near the roots. Her eyes, surrounded by wrinkled, overhanging flesh, seemed a more vivid blue than before. Her body had fallen in. She was very placid, and only spoke in answer to questions. The rest of the time she gazed at him, evidently regarding his return as a divine benefaction. She lived alone now in her shop. Adriaen's father had gone—fled away north, when the Truce came to an end and the Spaniards returned. He really could not be bothered at his age to keep changing his religion, he had said; it was easier to change his home, and go north to a safely Protestant land. And she could not be bothered to change her home, and was certainly not going to change her religion. So they had sold the little cottage, and he had taken the money and gone. It

was lonely without him at first. She was used to him. But now she preferred it. Her bones ached sometimes, otherwise she was well, God be praised. She had no friends—for Mother Bannincx had been taken to her rest—only a few regular customers. She was happy with her two Masses a day.

Adriaen extracted so much information with a great deal of patient questioning. She far preferred to look at him with admiring eyes, listening intently to everything he said, thoughtfully treasuring it, however trivial. She was not really interested in Bladelin, though for Adriaen's sake she welcomed him. She just nodded her head when Adriaen announced one morning that they were going. She had expected this long before, and was grateful to God for allowing her so much of her son. She rolled up some food for them in an old shirt of her husband's, and accompanied them on their way as far as St. Walburga's, where she worshipped. Here Adriaen kissed her, and watched her as she dragged herself up the steps and disappeared through the great doorway into the cool dimness. He forced a laugh as they turned away and said: 'You must admit there are some good Catholics in this world.' But Bladelin wearily shook his head.

During the long journey north, on foot, on borrowed horses, on carts and farm-waggons, along canals, Bladelin had been morose and prayerful, while Adriaen had argued, bantered, and ignored, until he almost wished the man would succeed in doing away with himself. He seemed to have complete confidence in Adriaen and yet to be afraid of him, as if Adriaen was a tyrannical parent. Then he took to calling Adriaen anti-Christ, seeking to convert him, but ending his denunciations in whimpering, irritating self-pity. He often refused

food and had to be fed forcibly, and this necessary violence increased his fear. Only sometimes when he was playing his flute could Adriaen recognize the real Bladelin. Adriaen could not think what to do with him in Amsterdam, for he himself was going to paint, and no amount of lunacy was going to prevent this. . . .

The arms of land had slowly thickened, and now hung a reflection in the sea. Towers and masts showed above the dikes. A deep violet band of storm threatened from the east and was re-echoed in the sea. Over on the right was a motionless windmill, and a church tower squatted in the hazy distance. Adriaen turned.

‘Nearly there, now.’

Bladelin took no notice.

II

At the age of twenty-seven Adriaen began to paint a portrait of himself. Most other painters did so, why shouldn’t he? His features were as good as theirs probably, and his general appearance quite certainly worse. They were usually bent on self-flattery. He would emphasize his uncomeliness. They were absorbed in themselves. He didn’t really interest himself much—he knew himself too well. They probably painted themselves to try to find out what they were really like.

So he borrowed money for his equipment, on the security of his future pictures, from the Jew Snortheim, who had rented them a hovel at the end of his little garden. One night, when every one was out, he also borrowed the mirror from Snortheim’s kitchen and at

dawn next day he set to work, after a sleepless night of excited anticipation, on his first picture for months. He worked feverishly until the light began to fail, when he realized that he was as ravenous as in Breda. Then he looked long at his picture, threw it at Bladelin's head, kissed Snortheim's kitchen-wench until she had given him the remnants of her master's dinner, and went back to the hovel.

Next day he started all over again, after a good night's rest, calmly, having expended his original lust. He set up his canvas underneath the cracked skylight and slung the mirror on a piece of twine from the slope of the low roof. The smoke from the brazier—taken from a rubbish heap, with bricks as a substitute for its missing leg—sailed past his nose and out through a hole in the skylight, making him cough and stinging his eyes. Bladelin coughed into his flute, as he lay on some sacks on the hardened earth floor.

Bladelin scarcely ever went outside their dwelling-place. He prayed and blew melancholy tunes from his flute, which brought tears to his own eyes and sent a sad dance of thoughts through Adriaen's mind. He talked quite lucidly sometimes of the career of his beloved William, though Adriaen always steered him away from the final tragedy. There was apt to be feeble violence at this point, when he would identify Adriaen as anti-Christ, Papist, Spaniard, and murderer. Fortunately he was not strong enough to do much physical harm, but Adriaen could not bear to see the muddy clouding of his eyes and the peevish craftiness creep over his face. Only when he was at prayer did Adriaen have real peace. At such times he was safe to go out in search of food and amusement,

always, however, locking the door and pocketing the key.

Amid coughing, dismal fluting, mumbled prayers, and chilly, eye-stinging smoke, the self-portrait grew. Adriaen found his powers strengthened by his months of abstinence, and he painted rapidly and confidently in fluid browns and blacks, olive-green, and a dirty white. This sombreness suited his dwelling, his moods of anxious melancholy engendered by his life with Bladelin, and contrasted restfully with the weeks of brilliant violence in Breda. He enjoyed doing it more than anything he had ever painted before, leaving himself no time even for debauchery, though he grew tired of the continual sight of his own face. The portrait was just more than profile, the head a little to one side. The dark hair, moustache, and beard were unkempt, the neck thickish, the coat and shirt ragged, dirty, and too big for him. The eyes were sad and mocking; the cheeks dirty and rather puffy; the expression that of a weak, middle-aged debauchee. One flabby hand was tucked away inside the flap of his coat. The background was a vague, stormy, dirty green landscape, with a rootling porker just visible in the distance. As an experiment he insisted on Bladelin, who had so far taken no interest, studying it closely when finished. At first he peevishly refused to look at a picture of anti-Christ, but Adriaen was sympathetically firm, and gradually his eyes unclouded and Bladelin returned. At length he said: 'Oh, Adriaen, it's a cruel thing! It's a filthy caricature. You're not like that — and yet you are. This man is a feeble, sentimental fornicator. You're a cynical, confident sinner. This man is happy to drift and take no trouble. You have genius, and though you are a disgusting idler, and without personal

pride, there is that in you which prevents you from ever prostituting your art. The devil can have your body and soul, provided you can paint. This poltroon will be rejected even by the devil. He will be blotted out—and rightly. Satan will claim you with rejoicing as one of his own. But so would God.'

'You don't think it good?'

'Oh, it's good. Whatever you do is good. But it's not Adriaen Brouwer. It's so like you to make yourself out as unappetizing as possible.'

'I shall destroy it, then.'

'No, no. You mustn't.'

'Wouldn't you like to destroy it?'

'Yes, I would—and I wouldn't.'

This gave Adriaen an idea, and the next day he dashed off an obscene, brightly coloured, crowned monkey, which he labelled 'The most Christian King of Spain' in huge crimson letters, and left propped up against the wall when he went out. He came back later, having sold his self-portrait well, to find Bladelin sleeping like a child, and the most Christian King of Spain hacked to pieces.

III

Snortheim's garden, through which he had to pass to reach the street, always seemed to Adriaen an adequate caricature of life and people as he had experienced them. The path was overgrown with weeds and littered with snail-shells. The flower-beds went back as far as the low wall on either side—a tangled, warring, green mass of taut, hairy stems, thorny rose bushes with a blossom or two, leaves fighting relentlessly

upwards to the light, clumps of nettles and twining parasites, in the rustling gloom of which dingy sparrows scrabbled furtively after insects.

A short walk down the street, and he was on the cobbles by the lime-shaded canal—thick, oily, dark green, filled with leaves when the wind was high, with scarcely-moving refuse and stationary barges striped with lines of bright colour at all times, backed by ramshackle houses of dull brick, and roofed in with a sky which it was too turgid to reflect. A few yards along the canal hung the sign of ‘The Shield of France’—pale faded blue with faded golden fleur-de-lis—creaking excruciatingly in the breeze. Adriaen was always meaning to paint a new sign in payment for some of the drinks for which he owed. Inside was a table by the dirty, opaque mullions of the window, at which Adriaen liked to sit and watch the passers-by. There were other tables, stools, and beer casks altered to make chairs, a fireplace, wooden stairs leading up without banisters, and a smell of stale smoke.

Adriaen and Van Zomeren, who owned ‘The Shield of France,’ were very soon intimate—Adriaen had little use for friends with whom he could not be immediately intimate. Van Zomeren was a man after his own heart, lazy, rubicund, bald, thick-set, heavily moustached, with stained old clothes, and a hoarse, drawling voice, punctuated with frequent expectoration, and eyes that looked at you boldly as if to try to counteract his general impression of ineffectuality. He was delighted when he discovered that Adriaen was a painter, confessed to having been one himself, and lent money, repayment of which he rarely claimed. He had long given up painting—no money in it. Tavern-keeping was far more profitable, he said. If you wanted to make

money in this world you had to cater for men's appetites —the more vicious the appetite the more profitable the business. Besides, painters were despised, and rightly so. There were too many of them, all doing the same sort of thing rather badly. So he 'd bought up 'The Shield,' married the serving-maid, who went with the premises, and been very contented. The serving-maid had a face like a gargoyle and legs like a bottle; but you must have a woman to keep house for you; she cooked and managed well, and he couldn't be bothered to look elsewhere. They were very happy, and had had as many as nine children at one time or another. Adriaen told him stories with such gusto that the other drinkers crept round to listen. He showed him his pictures whenever they were finished, and Van Zomeren chuckled happily over them, inventing long and obscene histories for each character.

'You talk about making money,' Adriaen said to him, 'but you don't really care. If you did you 'd make me pay my debts. But you really agree with me that poverty is the only state, for it prevents smugness and saves such a deal of trouble. All I want is paint, canvas, brushes, brandy, and tobacco with plenty of hemlock in it. Tobacco — that stimulates a man! Talk about spiritual exultation! They may have it, these priests and fanatics. But even I have it—I, whom Bladelin calls anti-Christ. I have it when I 'm contemplating a picture, while the ideas are bubbling in my mind, and I have it after the first few puffs of a pipe. D' you have spiritual exultation, Van Z?'

Van Zomeren laughed.

'No, God be thanked. I 'm sane!'

Adriaen laughed too.

'Yes, I think you are, you old lout. But these

religious ones! Your Catholics are cruel and garish, and suppress liberty of thought; your Calvinists are dull and grim, and suppress liberty of thought; and they 're all hypocrites, English, Flemish, Spaniards, or Dutch. The whole world is governed by fear, breeding hatred and cruelty, and the only cure is laughter.'

'Then you must cure the world.'

'Sblood! It 's not worth curing. Besides, if I did start out to cure it, I 'd never be able to laugh any more. No, the world can tear itself to shreds and I 'll sit back and laugh. Paint and brandy can bring me my ecstasy, until I 'm scraped off the world's canvas with the divine palette-knife—if there is such a thing—and I shan't care a stiver and nor will any one else. Send for more brandy, Van Z!'

Then one evening as he was returning from 'The Shield,' fortunately quite sober, he saw Bladelin turn out of their street. Bladelin walked straight towards him and straight past him, staring ahead, glassy-eyed. Adriaen turned to follow, cursing himself for his neglect. They went along beside the canal, in which quivered the reflection of a sunset like a raw wound. Some men on a black barge were lazily unloading straw-covered, dark green jorums in front of a wine-shop. An old woman in black, with an enormous white head-dress, was earnestly poking a fat pink fore-finger into the bellies of some ducks laid out on a table, while the aproned proprietor stood beside, watching her intently. A young man and a girl, their arms round each other's waists, their faces curiously immobile, strolled by, as apart from the world as a planet and its satellite. Bladelin took no notice of any of these things. He went straight ahead, fixed in his purpose.

They approached the richer quarters of the town. The streets on both sides of the canal became broader, more crowded. In spite of Bladelin, Adriaen could not help looking about him. The buildings gradually changed character—tall thin houses of grey stone or dark brick, with double stone steps leading up to green front doors, elegant wrought-iron lamps, secretive windows above, and the inevitable pulley jutting from the top story—houses as self-satisfied and exclusive as their owners. A large grey dog with a pale blue bow round its neck was barking plaintively up at a wall, where a tabby cat hissed and glared, with stone-cruel eyes like Bladelin in his present mood. Golden leaves fluttered to the ground, and the little wind sent them dancing with the faintest scratching noise across the stone flags and into the water. A church tower rose above the house façades. With a whirring of wings a flock of thousands of sparrows wheeled across the sky.

Bladelin stopped and turned. A tall, dark man, foppish in pink velvet, was approaching Adriaen. Yes, he certainly looked Spanish, and Bladelin was coming up quickly after him. Adriaen edged towards the canal. The man came closer, humming to himself. Adriaen stopped him. ‘Excuse me, Mijnheer, but you are about to be assaulted.’

The man looked up, puzzled, and when he saw Adriaen he lifted one nostril and the side of his mouth as if in pain. But at that moment Bladelin sprang, and the fop pitched forward into Adriaen’s arms. Adriaen laughed, held him for a moment, then put him aside, and reached for Bladelin, who was fumbling with his palette-knife. Bladelin stared, furious and unrecognizing, and tried to snatch away his wrist. Adriaen

smacked his cheek. Bladelin put his hand up to his face and began to sob. A crowd had begun to collect, some boys, a little grubby girl, the dog with the blue bow barking petulantly, a pugnacious-looking fellow with a barrow of shell-fish.

'Oh, Adriaen! Adriaen!' Bladelin sobbed. 'How could you?' His eyes were nearly normal again.

'Go home, quick!' Adriaen ordered.

'Hitting the poor fellow like that! What had he done to you?' grumbled the shell-fish seller, indignantly presenting a red sweaty face.

'Gave him a clout like God Almighty!' observed the grubby little girl with obvious relish.

Adriaen began to laugh. Of course they would all turn on him!

'A clear case of collusion,' said the victim of the assault. 'One attacks, the other pretends to protect and snatches the purse. I shall inform—'

Adriaen did not wait to hear any more. He suddenly gave a loud yell, and took to his heels. Except for the dog with the blue bow, the pursuit was not pressed.

He reached the hovel, found Bladelin safely on his knees, and went back to 'The Shield' to quench a formidable thirst and make the other patrons of the tavern bellow with laughter at his highly embroidered version of the incident.

Bladelin was sobbing in a dark corner when Adriaen returned to offer him some flour cakes which he had begged from Van Zomeren. He snatched the cakes and threw them at Adriaen's head. Adriaen picked them up, blew off the outer coating of dirt, squatted on the floor, and began to eat.

'How could you strike me, Adriaen?'

'To bring you to your senses.'

'You are an anti-Christ, and that man was the murderer!'

'What murderer?'

'The murderer of William—father of our land.'

'My dear fellow, this man was young. Your murderer would be at least sixty by now. Your murderer was a Spaniard, this poor devil was Dutch. Anyhow, they killed your murderer, with far worse tortures than any the Spaniard could invent—and someone ate his heart. I doubt if he's still alive.'

'His soul is reincarnate. It is condemned to wander the earth in misery. And that was the reincarnation. I may never see him again.'

'I shall never see my palette-knife again. How did you get out of here?'

'Through the skylight.'

Adriaen looked up. The skylight was smashed clean out.

'Must have been a tight squeeze. It'll be cold at night.'

'Oh, God forgive me . . . God forgive me!'

Bladelin buried his head. Adriaen scratched his, and sighed. What a fool to leave Bladelin! Yet he had seemed so quiet. No more 'Shield of France' now. Poor Bladelin! It would be better for him if he died. This creature, sobbing in the corner, must surely be some devil in Bladelin's body? Perhaps the wandering, reincarnate soul of William's murderer itself. That, of course, would be one of life's most characteristic gestures. He suddenly laughed, and Bladelin looked up, glaring.

IV

There was no food in the hovel. Adriaen had been working hard and forgotten. The Snortheim household was empty. There was nothing for it. He must leave Bladelin, or they would both starve. Bladelin had been maudlin of late, weeping tears of self-pity, preventing Adriaen from concentrating on his picture —a wild head of Jabbeke, with staring, excited eyes and coils of smoke issuing from a huge red O of a mouth.

He walked quickly to 'The Shield of France,' borrowed a few stivers from Van Zomeren, and went on to the baker's. On the way back Van Zomeren beckoned him in. A quarrel was in progress over a game of cards. Van Zomeren pointed and led Adriaen to his window seat, bringing him paper. Three peasants were each accusing the others of cheating. Tempers were up, cards and mugs lay on the floor. One had the wine-jug by its handle, another a broom, the third a fire-iron. They prowled round each other like suspicious dogs taking preliminary sniffs. Van Zomeren stood watching over Adriaen's shoulder. When the quarrel showed signs of dying from cowardly inanition, Adriaen resuscitated it with offensive epithets, which sent the dogs snarling and prowling again. After Adriaen had finished his sketch, Van Zomeren brought brandy and they argued, until two of the quarrellers at last set half-heartedly upon the third and they had to throw them out into the street.

Night had fallen when Adriaen suddenly remembered Bladelin.

It was as he feared. The mended skylight was broken again, the fragments of glass glittered on the

floor in the distant light from a window, the interior was dark and stank clammily. He went in and lit a candle. His paints and brushes were scattered about the room, his easel overturned, the picture on the floor. He picked it up. Something was scrawled across an unpainted bit.

He ran out with it, where he could catch the light from a house near the canal.

‘Anti-Christ,’ straggled in scarlet.

He took it by a corner and threw it away. He watched it skim into the darkness, and heard it flop faintly into the water. He ran off. Almost immediately someone stepped from the shadow of a tree.

‘Why are you coming out of Snortheim’s house?’

‘Who the devil are you?’

‘The watch. I have orders to look after the Jew’s house in his absence.’

‘I rent his outhouse at the back. Have you seen a queer, pale-looking fellow?’

‘Yes; I stopped him. He didn’t seem able to talk sense.’

‘Which way did he go?’

‘Along there, over the bridge.’

Adriaen ran. Leaning against the far end of the bridge was a one-legged man on crutches, who held out a seedy hat, growling for alms. Adriaen had a few stivers in his pockets. He poured them into the hat.

‘Thank you, Mijnheer.’

‘Mijnheer your rump! Have you seen a madman with staring green eyes come this way?’

‘One such went up yonder and turned into Geest’s confectionary.’

Adriaen rushed off, and the cripple, chuckling to himself, hobbled away to the nearest tavern.

The confectionary was closed, of course. Adriaen knocked for a long time. And meanwhile Bladelin might be anywhere. What a cursed idiot not to lay in food, to stay drinking and caricaturing at 'The Shield'!

'What's all this knocking?'

Adriaen looked up. A woman's head in a night-cap.

'A man with a mad look—he—'

'Is that all? Why drag God-fearing women out of their beds to—'

'I never drag women, God-fearing or otherwise, out of their beds. I—'

'Oh!'

The window was slammed down. Adriaen waited for a few moments, then wandered on down the street. It was hopeless, this search. Amsterdam was a huge place, and he was almost fainting with hunger. Nevertheless he went on, peering into the faces of the few men still about, who thought he was a thief and struck out at him with their sticks. The street went on and on, straight ahead. Light clouds raced across the stars. Cats were screeching and hissing in dark alley-ways. Lovers stood, dark and oblivious, beside the walls. There was a baby yowling somewhere.

Adriaen found himself in the huge empty square of the Dam. He sat wearily on the ground, leaning his back against a tree. Why did he mind so much about Bladelin? He had only lost a devil dressed up in Bladelin's body. The real Bladelin had courage and nobility in a world of frightened idiots. But the idiots prospered and lived like nobles, hiding their fears

behind a façade of possessions, while Bladelin himself had become an idiot—and with such a paltry, slobbering idiocy! O God, he was hungry! This was Breda over again. It was too late to get food anywhere now. But where was Bladelin in all this vast, sleeping, carousing, indifferent city?

He scrambled to his feet and stood swaying, until the Dam stopped whirling round and round him. Then he staggered off. He would find Bladelin, even if it meant walking all over Amsterdam.

He found himself back again in the Dam at day-break, still searching. A hunting party, horses, hounds, men and women in rich colours, were clattering across the cobbles, on their way out of the city. A slight drizzle was falling.

V

Time passed. Adriaen continued his search, making inquiries everywhere. Absorbed in painting in the detail of a shoe or the high-light on a jug he would suddenly remember, put down his palette and brush, and go out. Somehow, somewhere in Amsterdam, Bladelin had met his death and been flung into a pauper's burial-pit, with earth and rubbish and old pots and pans flung on top of him. Such was the end of the only real Christian man he had found in all this bloody, warring conflict of Christian creeds. What did the end matter? Look at Jabbeke's ignominious death. Why bother with a final grandiloquent gesture a few hours before your proud body stinks and crawls with maggots? And the real Bladelin had been long dead.

The leaves dropped from the trees into the canal and

passing boats pushed them into the side, where they rotted in the still, dark water. Or the wind drove them along just above the boisterous canal, till they were caught by a spurt of water and floated slowly down, a dispersed, sombre argosy. Adriaen watched them, shivering, and then turned into 'The Shield,' calling for brandy and paper, and trying to put his wild fusions of ideas into words, growling even at Van Zomeren when he sat down for a talk.

The winds died and the frosts came, and the last leaves dropped off, leaving skeletons of trees above water that looked like ice. Adriaen deserted his hovel and lived at 'The Shield.' His work began to suffer. To his fury, figures which he intended to be comic turned out insipid.

One day as he was boiling up some size over a fire before preparing a panel, he suddenly said out loud: 'I will go and see the Hals.' His next thought was: 'I am a coward. I shall be merely running away from my depression.' The next: 'I don't care if I am a coward. So is every one else. In any case I should like to drink with old Frans again.'

He waited until the canals were frozen hard, left his few possessions with Van Zomeren, told him to look after his affairs—if any—in his absence, borrowed some money, a cloak, and a pair of skates from him, and started off, wobbling dangerously, at earliest light down the canal from Amsterdam to Haarlem.

VI

As always, Adriaen's mind was lulled to drowsy contentment by strenuous physical exercise. His ankles began to ache soon after he had left Amsterdam, and

the soles of his feet swelled more and more tightly. He took frequent rests, sitting on the frosted grass at the side of the canal, on boats frozen in and abandoned, or on the decrepit landing-stages of canal-side cottages. He shared a meal on a barge with its owner and his family, who had been stupid enough to be caught there by the frosts, and would not be able to move for perhaps several weeks.

Later the enormous arch of the sky darkened and sagged earthwards, and the whole landscape became dirty monochrome. It was curious gliding along with one's shoulders apparently level with the ground on either side, having a dog's-eye view of one's surroundings. Why had he imagined that he would be able to reach Haarlem in a day? Either he would have to skate through the night, or lie down to rest on the bank and be frozen to death. Well, presumably you fell into a torpor before the end came. His feet felt as if they were dropping off. The surface was uneven, white, and cracked in places, and his skates made a rough growl instead of a clean hiss. The canal stretched straight ahead. . . .

When he had reached that state of tiredness in which his mind became a separate entity, watching with pity his increase of bodily pain, he luckily found a canal-side tavern, to which parties from Haarlem probably used to sail in summer. He took off his skates and bared his feet, ate ravenously, drank some brandy, and fell asleep in front of a roaring fire.

The next day, after paying the host a profit of three hundred per cent, he squeezed his feet into his boots and skates and tottered painfully down to the canal. It was even colder to-day, and he saw himself smudging in the indigo sky of an imaginary impression with

broad sweeps of his thumb. He was stiff and tired, his eyes were burning, and there seemed to be a heavy weight between his shoulder-blades. Yet he was happy to be gliding along almost on a level with the ground, as if he were part of the earth, from which all beauty sprang. Animals, sweating peasants, tulip bulbs shooting out roots to make fortunes, women in child labour, last year's leaves, mating youth; if there was a God, then God preferred such things.

The sky darkened. A wind arose, blowing from behind him, slowly strengthening. He held his cloak open like a sail. The wind increased. Something chilly hit him on the nape of the neck, making him shiver. Then the air all around was full of snow-flakes driving past, nearly parallel with the ice, while some went swirling upwards again, and heavier ones bore almost straight down. The long stretch of the canal was hidden. He could only see about ten yards ahead. The sigh of the wind was the only noise. A flake must go miles from the moment it started to fall until the moment it hit the ground, to merge its identity in pure whiteness. He began to sing as he sailed forward. Looking back for a moment he saw his tracks being speedily obliterated, but the bite of snow on his face quickly made him turn round. Snow spurted away on either side of his feet, each a miniature ship. It was like flying, this. It would, perhaps, form the background of a tobacco dream—the coarsely gratifying sensations of the first few puffs, followed by the perfection of this whirling, white world, without its physical effort.

The wind died gradually, but the snow still fell straight and heavy, coldly stroking his face. His feet would no longer move of their own accord. He had

to plough through an inch or more of snow, and as he moved his legs and arms again, he found that they were stiff and soaked. He had no idea where he was, nor how far from Haarlem. He could see nothing and kept running into the bank. Once he tumbled right forward into the heaped snow, chilling face and fingers, and hoisting himself up with a string of oaths. ‘The Return of the Prodigal’ might be painted like this—not, as usual, in an overheated brothel. If he thought out the picture in detail, he might forget his tiredness. But every one painted the subject, though this would at least be an original interpretation. No—good, earthy subjects for him. God’s love! it was hard work toiling through all this damnable pure whiteness. . . . Fifteen devils! He put out a hand just in time and sat heavily in the snow. Sixteen devils! What was it? A bridge?—a bridge curving away into the tumbling whiteness. A bridge—Haarlem. At last, God be praised! He got up hastily and plunged on, head down. . . .

He stood before the fire of the familiar tavern gulping brandy and sneezing, while water dripped from him to make a pool on the stone floor and hot-smelling steam came from his clothes. The brandy warmed him and he began to feel desperately sleepy. The innkeeper brought him a blanket and took away his clothes to dry. He lay down on the floor and immediately fell asleep.

He woke up later to find himself the laughing-stock of a company of labourers sitting round the fire, some of whom recognized him. He put on his half-dry clothes amid a good deal of chaff, and set out for Hals’s house, omitting to pay for his brandy. It was dark now, but only an occasional snowflake fell.

He knocked loudly at the main door, and, when no one appeared, he walked in. He knocked at the studio door. Hals's voice came gruffly: 'Go away!' Adriaen opened the door and walked in. By the light of the fire he saw Hals's bulk lumped in a chair, a girl on his knee.

'Still the same old Frans!' he chuckled.

'Who the devil . . . ?'

'Adriaen Brouwer, a poor lousy painter, though once your pupil.'

'By God, Adriaen! Come in, you devil! Here, get off, you!'

He pushed the girl off his lap, and lurched over to take Adriaen's hands and kiss him smackingly on both cheeks.

'Be careful, Frans! She 'll be jealous.'

'She! Pooh—you love me too much, don't you, Judith?'

'You 'll serve, Frans, when Molenaar 's not here.'

The girl shrugged her shoulders proudly. The fire-light outlined the coarse, handsome strength of her profile, and ringed the brown mass of her hair with a glow of gold.

'Haughty cat, isn't she? Name of Judith—Judith Leyster. She 's my pupil.'

'In the art of love?'

'Ah, still the same impudent guttersnipe!' He slapped Adriaen on the back. 'And she is promising, I can tell you.'

'So I saw.'

'Though at present she imitates me too slavishly.'

'God forbid! You make love like a lecherous he-bear.'

'You young devil!'

He hit Adriaen a blow in the chest which made him stagger. ‘But come, we must drink to celebrate your return.’

‘Good. I am frozen and starving. I’ve just skated up from Amsterdam.’

‘God alive! You’re madder than ever!’

CHAPTER XII

PORTRAIT OF A COWARD

I

LYSBETH HALS was propped up in the big bed with her newest son at her breast.

'Hush! Quietly!' she murmured. 'And shut the door behind you when you come into a lady's room.'

'Forgive me, sweetest!'

'But why the palette and brushes, Adriaen?'

'I had to fly from Judith. She is sensitive and quick-tempered about her painting and her lovers.' He went over to the bed. Lysbeth smiled up at him, pink, contented, and perky.

'Judith is a little strumpet,' she said placidly. 'I can guess what goes on downstairs. When I am about again, by God, I'll scratch that haughty look off her face! Ouch! this little devil does hurt sometimes.'

Adriaen put his palette and brush on the floor and sat down on the end of the bed, watching.

'A simple, crude business.'

'What?'

'Feeding the human young.'

'Oh, no, Adriaen. It's lovely, really, even though it hurts at times.'

'Uninteresting little animals. It seems a pity that your bloom of beauty should be spoiled by bearing brats'

to a great hulk like Frans. Probably Judith's will be, too.'

'Adriaen, how dare you! I'll kill her if——'

'Well, you'll have to kill most of the young girls in Haarlem, if you once start.'

'Adriaen, be quiet!' She wriggled. The baby became restless and whimpered.

'There, there, little gargoyle!'

She settled him more comfortably, and the placid rhythm of sucking noises began again.

'Besides, Adriaen, what about you and the young girls of Haarlem?'

'Me? I prefer brandy.'

'Adriaen!'

'Except for you, of course, my sweet Lysbeth.'

'Adriaen, you're . . . Ouch! — you small devil, you! Come over here.'

She lifted the wizened little object, whimpering and dribbling milk from its minute rosebud of a mouth, and changed it over. It settled down with much grunting.

'The cherubic little porker,' said Adriaen. 'A true son of his father—only happy when drinking. What exquisite little hands they have! I think you're very clever to have made a thing like that, Lysbeth, uglier than sin though it is.'

'Adriaen, he's a beautiful boy!'

'We painters strive to create a thing of completeness, perfection—and you do it quite naturally, without the least effort.'

'Ha! I like that—without the least effort! Just you try having a baby, young fellow!'

'Shall I? Who shall I have as father? Frans? Roelandts?'

She laughed, and her son gurgled in protest.

'Forgive me, little monster. . . . Oh, Adriaen, did you know that Cornelia had twins ?'

'Cornelia ?'

'Cornelia, your Cornelia. Cornelia de Roode.'

Adriaen laughed.

'Stop, man, you 're disturbing my son! Yes, twin girls. They say she was furious, but he was delighted. He 's a magistrate now, you know.'

Adriaen slapped his knee.

'God's mercy, I 'll go and see her! That will be sublimely funny! I shall laugh for a week. I 'll borrow Frans 's best suit. Bless you, Lysbeth, for reminding me of her. I 'd forgotten all about Cornelia. I 'll go and see Frans now.'

'Stay and talk to me, Adriaen!'

For a reply Adriaen bent and kissed her lips as fully and satisfactorily as if he were plucking the petals of a rose. She looked up at him with shining eyes and pink, impudent, contented face.

II

It was a crisp, sunny day when Adriaen knocked at the door of the de Roode house. He chuckled as he looked down at his clothes, borrowed from Frans without his knowledge or permission—shining black velvet which hung down in festoons, black wrinkled stockings, and enormous black flapping shoes, with bravely shining buckles. Cornelia would think him a wealthy, successful man, in no need of her patronage, and it would be amusing to see how she behaved. It would be pleasant, too, to look again at the animal attraction

of her golden skin, her red-gold hair, and the curve of her nose in her hard face.

'Yes, Mevrouw de Roode was within. Mijnheer de Roode was out. Would Mijnheer Brouwer wait, and she would inquire whether Mevrouw de Roode would receive him?'

Cornelia was lying on a couch before a large fire, a yellow damask covering over her feet, eating comfits from a round box. The yellow curtains were half drawn over tall windows, and some of the candles in the candelabra were lit. The panels of the walls were painted with improbable landscapes in the pseudo-French manner, and the little room was crowded with elaborate furniture, crockery, seascapes, vases of sham flowers, faience, all the knick-knackery of the tasteless successful. The scented heat nearly knocked him over.

Cornelia's arms and hands, shining in the candle-light, caught his eye first. They were red and mottled. The laces of her bodice were undone, and part of a slatternly, though still impudent breast, was flaunted at him. Her hair straggled and had lost its lustre, and there were a few white strands. The lines in her face had hardened. Her mouth was a drooping rose. The skin of her neck sagged. Her listless, sleepy eyes had a thin ring of red round their rims. Her rich clothes were crumpled and blowsy. An open book lay turned down on her lap. Her fingers were covered with rings. She yawned as Adriaen came in.

Adriaen kept the smile on his face with an effort.

'Well—so we meet again.' Her voice was deeper, but still essentially the same. She made no attempt to pull herself together as he took up a hand to kiss. His lips touched muggy flesh.

'What distinguished manners we have learnt!' she went on. 'And such smart clothes—though I wouldn't recommend your tailor, I'm bound to say.' She yawned again. Her teeth were still good. 'Ring that bell on the mantelpiece and we will have some wine. My husband will be in soon. He will be pleased to see you. He works hard, and we do not have many visitors.'

Adriaen did as he was told, and squeezed himself into an elegant, uncomfortable chair.

'I was asleep when you came in. I like a nap in the afternoons. It wastes the time. These love-poems by Nootman are quite good—they usually send me off. Do you know them?'

'I have little time for reading.'

'Ah— you have a sensible job. Given up that ridiculous painting?'

'I paint whenever there is light to paint by.'

'Then you must be unusually successful.' She eyed his clothes.

'These are borrowed for the occasion.'

'I am complimented.'

The wine was brought in. Adriaen helped them both. It was a good wine. Cornelia drank hers at a gulp, and held out her glass again. It was an over-ornate thing. She belched genteelly.

'You made a fine fool of me, Adriaen.'

'I rather thought I was the one to be made a fool of.'

'I was thankful you left Haarlem after my marriage. I was a little fool before I married, a little fool to marry.' She sighed. 'But disillusionment soon brings content. You know I have twin girls?'

'Yes. I had a long laugh over that.'

She wrinkled up her nose at him, and succeeded in looking almost attractive again for a moment.

'They are out taking the air now, but they 'll be in soon. A handsome couple, they are reckoned to be. Joris adores them. He is a person of some importance now.'

'That must be very gratifying.'

She shrugged her fleshy golden shoulders, and her bodice fell even lower. She noticed this untidiness for the first time and corrected it.

'I 'm afraid I 've learnt some of your slovenliness!' She smiled sadly. Adriaen felt disposed to like her for the first time. 'And did you stay long with those quaint Englishmen ?'

'I went through the siege of Breda.'

'Oh, how interesting! Tell me.'

'Is that Cornelia asking, or the society lady being polite ?'

'Oh, I dare say it 'll be as interesting as anything else. Something to gossip about, anyhow.'

Adriaen told her. At first he exaggerated the horrors and hardships. Then he became genuinely interested in his own story, reliving the experiences of those appalling months, dramatizing them and himself, taking pleasure in the appreciation of his own performance. He was surprised to find himself standing up, with sweat pouring off him, when he was interrupted in the middle by the entrance of Cornelia's twins. But he was astonished to see that a gradual and partial rejuvenation was taking place in Cornelia. The flesh on her face appeared softer, tauter, her hair seemed to have regained a little of its fiery crispness, there was some of the old light in her swimming eyes.

The twins, dressed alike in white velvet and white furs, pale, large-eyed editions of their father, were standing timidly there hand-in-hand, like two puppets. Cornelia slowly relaxed, called them to her, fondled them, played with their dark curls, showed them off to Adriaen, while they gazed at him with stupid solemnity. But after a few minutes she was bored with them and ordered them out of the room. They gaped when Adriaen made them an elaborate burlesque bow, and toddled out solemnly hand-in-hand. As the door shut behind them, Cornelia sighed: 'Please go on, Adriaen.'

The dramatic mood had left him. Those ponderous children made him feel impish.

He tried boasting this time, inventing a succession of incredible feats of arms for himself. Cornelia seemed to like this even better. She sat up and drew nearer and nearer to him, her mouth closed firmly, her breath hissing through her nostrils.

Then Joris came in. He looked tired, dispirited, and dulled. Cornelia merely said: 'Oh, Joris, you remember Adriaen Brouwer, the painter? He's been telling me such wonderful stories about the siege of Breda. Go on, Adriaen.'

Adriaen bowed to Joris, who nodded, helped himself to wine, and flopped into a chair.

Adriaen told the story of the two lovers crouching nightly in the dark corner of the wall. He improved on it, of course, making it far less commonplace than the reality, and mournfully imitated the feeble voices of those who had been for him nothing but voices. Once again he lost himself in the story. Cornelia's eyes were soft as velvet, and their ring of red gleamed with tears. Soon Joris was sitting upright, his wine-

glass held in the air, his mouth fixed open, and when Adriaen finished speaking he shot question after question at him, until a servant announced someone waiting to see him in the library on important business. He swore, got up, and shook Adriaen lustily by the hand for a full half-minute. As soon as he had gone Cornelia pushed herself up from her couch and seized both Adriaen's hands, looking at him with eyes that told him plainly what a mistake he had made in coming.

'Oh, Adriaen, Adriaen!' She was squeezing her nails into the palms of his hands. He could see, only too clearly, her bosom rising and falling—and it had ceased to be an important weapon in her armoury.

'I must go.'

'No, Adriaen, stay! Joris is always a long time talking business.'

She clutched his hands even tighter. A lock of hair had fallen into her eye. She tried to blow it aside, squinting a little.

'Adriaen, I—I'm alive again. You make me feel—'

'I must go.'

He snatched his hands away and bolted for the door.

Later Joris came back to the stuffy little sitting-room, locked the door, and took his wife in his arms for the first time for many months.

III

These women! . . . Adriaen found out that Judith Leyster was secretly painting a picture of him. She tried to hide it, but he insisted on looking at it, and she stood watching with a proud, deep smile. It was him, yet not him—an idealization, even though he

was holding up a wine-jug and smiling into it, seated at a table, with two fine strong legs stretched in front.

'Why d' you turn me into a hero?' he asked at length.

She shrugged her shoulders.

'I'm not a hero. I'm coarse and vicious. Why d' you paint me at all?'

She looked him straight in the eyes.

'I enjoy doing it.'

'As a picture, or as me?'

'As a picture of you.'

'And what about Frans and Jan Molenaar?'

She laughed.

'Oh—they'll do. But I'm just one of many with them. And they're so—so easy.'

'And I'm not?'

'I know how you despise women.'

'I don't despise them. They bore me. . . . And you're going to marry Molenaar?'

'I suppose so. He's young, he loves me, and he's a painter. I love painters.'

'So it would seem! But, Judith, listen. There's a maleness about your mind and your work that makes me admire you; and I think we could laugh together—but that is all.'

She looked away for a moment, then she said:

'I thought so. That is why I paint your picture. You can't take that away from me.'

'Judith—does this go deep?'

She nodded, looking at him frank and proud.

'There are only two things worth doing, Adriaen—loving and painting.'

'Painting, certainly. . . .'

.

Then he received a note from Cornelia:

. . . I must see you again. I thought once that I might offer you patronage, but if there is any helping to be done, it will be by you. You have even woken Joris up to take an interest in something beside his merchandise. He has to go to Amsterdam for business on Tuesday next. . . .

He tore up the note, and spent Tuesday painting in happy solitude.

The next thing was that Molenaar complained to Hals of Adriaen's behaviour with Judith, and they went for Adriaen together in the tavern.

'Love of God!' Adriaen protested, 'Judith only thinks she's fond of me because she knows I'm bored with women. And she only paints a picture of me because she knows I'll never love her. One of the penalties of my god-like beauty is that I'm continually upsetting women! You be thankful you've got a face like a swine's rump, Molenaar!'

IV

Next day Adriaen returned to Amsterdam. These women! Well, he was a coward, like every one else, flying first from depression, then from women. He was extremely glad to see Van Zomeren, who welcomed him back with delight, and gave him a room at 'The Shield of France.' Several people had been inquiring after him, Van Zomeren said; a poor-looking, oldish man had come several times, and a Mijnheer Van der Gevaert had promises of several commissions. Van Zomeren was pleased about it all. Adriaen was a coming man. He had only to paint steadily for a few

months and his name and his fortune were made. Van Zomeren was not jealous, but, after all, money was the only thing that mattered, and he would like his debts paid up with, perhaps, just a bit of interest, for friendship's sake.

Adriaen laughed and put his arm round Van Zomeren's shoulder.

'You shall have your money and your interest, Van Z—some time—if you 're lucky. But what should I do with a fortune, even if I ever made it? I believe you want me to cut a figure in society, so that you can say that you know me—painting portraits of expensive dresses with insipid virgins peering out of them. No, thank you!' But he took Van Zomeren's advice, and worked hard because he enjoyed it.

Van der Gevaert—a kindly old merchant, with a genuine appreciation of painting—appeared at 'The Shield' shortly afterwards, gave him two hundred guilders down for an unfinished canvas, and recommended a dealer in the Vlaamsche Steeg, where Adriaen sold some pictures well. In the dealer's shop he noticed a great many paintings which could only be by him or Adriaen Van Ostade. He did not remember having painted them. Yet, when he looked more closely, there was something characteristically Van Ostade about them. He was certainly not guilty of that sentimental violet-blue. He would ask the dealer where Van Ostade lived. . . . Well, would he? Van Ostade was apt to cling closely—like those women at Haarlem. Yet a clinging man was less irritating than a clinging woman. You could be rude to him, and he was always liable to understand. But why cling at all?

One day when he had brought a picture and was

looking round the room, he was interested by the sight of a poor-looking, oldish man who was gazing intently at one of his paintings. Adriaen stared at him for some time. Then he went round to the other side, and stared at him from there. And all the while the man gazed at Adriaen's picture, coughing occasionally. At length Adriaen pulled his sleeve.

'Excuse me,' he asked, 'but are you my father?'

The man turned his head slowly. The hair was dirty white. The long straggling moustache was dirty white, though its ends were brown. The swollen, blotchy cheek had now completely bunged up the left eye. The other little eye hid furtively behind tired, red lids. The face seemed covered with dry, deeply-wrinkled parchment, fitting loosely over the bones. He had grown a stump of a beard.

'Yes,' said Adriaen. 'I thought I recognized you.'

Pieter Brouwer's eye popped apprehensively up behind its barricade. It darted all over Adriaen, and then recognition and timidity gleamed in it.

'My son! My son!'

'Yes—I thought you 'd say that.'

The little eye took refuge again, offended. Pieter turned to Adriaen's picture.

'Did you paint that?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'You have certainly improved.'

'Thanks.'

'Though the subject seems to me coarse.'

'Life is coarse.'

'And you should not jest about poverty and hardship.'

'What else can you do about it?'

'If you lived in the penury that I do——'

'Mine 's worse. But where do you live?'

'In a garret, over the road there. I am come to that, Adriaen.' He coughed and spat.

'And what do you do?'

'I work in tapestry.'

'A designer, I suppose?'

'Well—not quite. I earn a little. But I am content. I have found peace of mind.'

'And left my mother.'

'Your mother always had peace of mind.' Pieter had begun to stand on his dignity. He had not altered much, Adriaen decided. 'She was able to earn her own living. Was my peace of mind to be sacrificed always to—'

'And in which religion have you found your peace of mind?'

'I will tell you.' Pieter looked about him, and then lowered his voice. 'I have no religion at all! It is so simple that I wonder I didn't think of it before. I have sacrificed my hope of eternal life to peace while on earth.'

Adriaen laughed.

'Oh, father, but have you the right to deprive the heavenly choir of your presence?'

Pieter stamped a large, splayed foot, and turned away to look at the next picture. This jeering, irreverent son of his had not changed much—except that he was even more confident in his brutal cynicism, and was obviously going to be a success where he himself had failed—and didn't care a stiver for that success. Yes—the boy was a good painter. He was also tall and dirtily handsome and self-assured. Pieter could not help a feeling of pride. And with the feeling of pride returned a semblance of fatherly affection. His

son was looking down at him, smiling. Pieter did not like that smile. He said hastily:

‘I am glad to see you again, my son. . . .’

‘I wondered when you were going to say that.’

Pieter swallowed, and coughed wheezily.

‘Where are you living?’

Adriaen hesitated for a moment.

‘Not far from here.’

‘Where?’

‘Quite close.’

‘Couldn’t we live together, Adriaen? I should like it. I have not much longer for this world—my cough, you know. It takes me in the lungs.’

He coughed again to show his cough taking him in the lungs. As a result he started coughing properly. He grew purple in the face, shook all over, tears streamed out of his eyes, and phlegm from his mouth. He was an unpleasant sight.

‘You see?’ he spluttered at length.

‘I see.’

Adriaen nodded, and patted him gently on the back.

‘I’d like to have one of my family to look after me for my remaining days.’

‘Your wife might have done that for you.’

‘Besides, it would be much cheaper living together.’

‘I’m sorry, father. I’ll come and see you as often as you like, but I’m not going to sacrifice my independence for any one. Living with you I should continually have to be considering you.’

‘I see life hasn’t taught you to think of others.’

‘No—it hasn’t. Tragic, isn’t it, with the example of my father before me?’

‘You are as cruel and insensitive still as when you were a boy.’

'I know, I know. It's the lack of religion. Come and sup with me to-night at "The Shield of France."

'Yes, I will. I know "The Shield of France." I inquired for you there. But I shan't come if it's too cold—my cough, you know.'

V

Adriaen liked Van der Gevaert. He was genuine, witty, a connoisseur, and a constructive critic of Adriaen's own work. So when he wanted to introduce Adriaen into society, Adriaen smilingly allowed it.

Van der Gevaert's circle mostly talked about painting, though Adriaen sometimes made them rock with laughter at an improper story. For Van der Gevaert's sake he did not overdrink. But he often tired of these sterile conversations and hurried back to 'The Shield of France,' to sozzle in the more congenial company of contrasted boors.

'There they sit,' he would tell Van Zomeren and other listeners, 'these women, like suet puddings dressed up in gleaming velvets, sipping Rhenish with their painted mouths pursed up into silly little genteel slits, making silly little agreeing noises, and gazing at you as if you were a new kind of tulip bulb or something. And the men, if you can call 'em so, loll and mince round the ladies' chairs in satin, ribboned breeches and high-heeled, buckled shoes, fingering the curls falling on to their shoulders, and talking, talking, my God—talking!'

He joined The White 'Lavender' and 'Fig-tree' companies of rhetoricians or actors, where every one turned up their noses at him, until it was a question of

acting. He went with parties to the theatre, where he cracked nuts and threw them at the players if they did not come up to his own high standard. He was commissioned to paint wall panels in the fashionable French style, and did so in the coarse Brouwer style. Occasionally he walked round the paupers' burial-grounds, still hoping to discover the fate of Bladelin. Well, Bladelin was now either on excellent terms with both the Stadholder William and his Spanish murderer, or he had just been blotted out. His problem, like so many others, was only soluble by death. Adriaen sighed, thinking of the weeks they had spent together at Baudouin's in Antwerp.

One evening as he sat in Van der Gevaert's house, a note was brought in to him: 'Your father ill—wants you.' It was signed by the man who lived below his father's garret. Adriaen excused himself.

Pieter Brouwer lay pallid and blotchy on a couch, waxen eyelids closed, tip of discoloured tongue between dirty teeth, an occasional little cough shaking his body and sending a drool of blood and saliva on to his beard. The man from below stood gazing down at him. The little room was in darkness, except for the stump of a candle standing on the floor in its own grease.

'How long has he been like this?' Adriaen asked.

'Hours. I heard a terrible noise up here—a choking, then a fall. So I came up. He was lying on the floor, blood round his mouth. I put him on the couch. He called for you, mentioned "The Shield of France." So I sent the note. You've been a long time coming.'

'I was out. The note followed me. Thank you for sending it.'

'Don't you want a physician?'

'What's the good? He's bound to die. He's

been dying for months. Besides, physicians are no use and they cost money.'

Pieter opened his eye and stared glassily round. Adriaen went up to the couch. His father's mouth worked. Adriaen bent down, but could hear nothing. He turned round.

'Get some brandy.'

'Haven't got any.'

'Go round to "The Shield of France." Ask Van Zomeren. Say it's for me. Quick, now!'

The man went out.

Adriaen sat on the couch and waited. His father stared unrecognizingly at him, and his pale lips moved ineffectively. So this was the end of father—a fitting end for once. What a wreck of a man he was! 'Terrible days! Terrible days! Adriaen, I shall now beat you.' If he had come to live in this attic he might have kept his father alive for a few more months. Well, he was better dead, like Bladelin. Who wasn't? Though he himself had no intention of dying if he could avoid it. . . . The man came in soon with the brandy.

'Good. You have been quick.'

Adriaen took the bottle, pushed back Pieter's tongue, and forced the neck between his teeth. He coughed weakly, spluttered, and swallowed. He shivered, and some of the brandy dribbled back, mixed with a little blood, over his beard. A spark of life leaped up in his eye. His lips moved again. Adriaen bent down.

'Anna, a priest!' He could hear the whisper this time. 'Priest.'

'Oh, I thought you'd found peace of mind in agnosticism?' he shouted back.

'Priest!'

'Which sort of priest? Catholic, Calvinist?'

A puzzled look came into Pieter's eye. A tear peeped out from behind the red rim. His brow furrowed slightly.

'Which sort of priest?' Adriaen repeated.

Pieter passed his tongue slowly over his lips. The puzzled look deepened. He could not decide.

'Calvinist?' Adriaen suggested.

The tear overflowed out on to his cheek, and another took its place. The tip of his tongue waggled indecisively.

'Catholic?' Adriaen suggested, and lifted the brandy bottle again. But before he could pour any in, a convulsion shook his father's body, the tongue waggled feebly, the mouth opened, the glassy look spread across his eye, swallowing up the light. Adriaen bent down. The breathing had ceased.

'All over,' he muttered.

The man fell on his knees and shut his eyes. Poor father—even in death he had been unable to make up his mind which Church he favoured. Adriaen closed the mouth and arranged the limbs in a more peaceful attitude. The man rose from his knees.

'And what about all my trouble?' he asked.
'Remember you have not had to pay a physician.'

Adriaen laughed and felt in his pockets.

'I haven't a stiver.'

'And your father only this moment dead!'

'Oh, go to hell!'

Adriaen looked down at his father's shrunken face.

'Good-bye, father. I wonder where the devil you are now?'

Then he closed the eyelids, stamped on the candle, and went out.

VI

Following custom, Adriaen gave a funeral feast to the memory of his father, inviting all Van der Gevaert's fashionable friends and Van Zomeren. He appeared in nothing but a pair of ragged old breeches, gave them a sumptuous meal, and took them to the theatre, where he jumped up on to the stage during an interval and told them drunkenly exactly what he thought of them, until he was thrown out and chased down the street, finally swimming a canal to avoid his pursuers.

For some reason this escapade was quickly the talk of Amsterdam. Adriaen was notorious. Invitations, commissions poured in. 'The Shield of France' did a roaring trade. Van der Gevaert and his friends were furious. On consideration, Adriaen thought it had all been rather silly.

After a few days of notoriety, he could bear it no longer. He was in grave danger of becoming society's pet. But they did not really care for him, nor for his art. His reputation as a painter would depend upon his originality as a practical joker. There would be no more peace for him in Amsterdam. He would go to Antwerp—the capital of art.

He announced his decision to Van Zomeren, who began to whine about his debts. Adriaen pointed out that he had taken more money during the last few days than ever in his life before. Van Zomeren became maudlin about the breaking up of their friendship. Adriaen pointed out that possessiveness was the antithesis of real friendship. He sold his pictures brilliantly to the dealer, and called on Van der Gevaert with the best as a parting present. He was refused entrance, so he left the picture with the servant and came away.

He made a bundle of his painting things, some books, and some old clothes. He slipped a few gold pieces under Van Zomeren's door, and tiptoed away in the middle of one night. He spent the next few days trying to find a ship bound for Antwerp, and finally sailed away at dawn as a windy rain hissed into the grey choppy water, feeling desperately sick, and muttering to himself: 'Coward, coward!'

CHAPTER XIII

PORTRAIT OF A PRINCE OF PAINTERS

I

ADRIAEN stood by the ramparts looking out across the waters of the Scheldt. Winter was softening, and the air and the sky were gentle this evening. Antwerp huddled below him down to the harbour, once a main and healthy artery, but, since the wars, weak and sluggish. Scattered lights were appearing as the upper sky darkened. Ships moved slowly up the estuary towards the jumbled network of masts and rigging inshore.

Adriaen had come to Antwerp penniless. After a drunken brawl on the night before they arrived he had awoken to find the store of wealth with which he had sailed from Amsterdam stolen. This, in spite of a blinding headache, had given him back a certain amount of good humour. All this unaccustomed money was really an encumbrance. Now he was back where he always had been, and the amusing game of wheedling money out of unwilling creditors would begin all over again. And this, unexpectedly, was at once made easy for him. He arrived in Antwerp to find himself famous. Mentioning at a picture-dealer's, whose owner was looking suspiciously at his raggedness, that he was Adriaen Brouwer, a man with gaunt, aristocratic features, and patchy greying hair, scattered at irregular intervals over his face, came up delightedly, introduced himself as Van der Bosch, kissed him on both cheeks in

spite of the dirt, and begged to be allowed to lend him money. The dealer protested that no distinguished artist could look like this, but Adriaen at once took charcoal and paper, and, with a rapid caricature of the dealer looking over the wall of a pigsty, reassured Van der Bosch. He bought painting necessities, held an all-night carouse in a harbour-side tavern, and had just enough money left to rent a tiny attic in a poor quarter. This looked out over roofs to the Scheldt, above both of which gulls, pigeons, and sparrows circled in separate, aimless flocks. He loved watching them, especially when they flew high, and the sun flashing on their white bellies made pigeons indistinguishable from gulls. The different colours and shapes of the roofs pleased him too, even when rain drifted over them, and they were all reduced to a uniform dinginess, with the water beyond blotted out, and only an occasional gull curving out of the gloom, screeching lugubriously. He was happy in his attic. . . .

He heard horse's hoofs behind him. It was an elderly man in rich black, with a crimson cloak hanging from his shoulders and falling on to the back of the dappled grey. He reined in not far from Adriaen, and looked out across the Scheldt to the flat lands beyond with deep, searching eyes. Thin, appreciative lips were visible beneath a soft brown moustache which flowed away to his bearded jaws. His large black plumed hat, set sideways on his head, showed more curling brown hair. He sat upright and still, his arms hanging loosely down, taut and majestic, yet relaxed, unconscious of the small fidgetings of his horse.

Adriaen screwed up his eyes to look at him better in the fading light. The pale fires of wintry sundown glowed in the sky, but although they were evidently

absorbing for the stranger, Adriaen found him the more interesting. Here was a man clearly conscious of his perfect manhood. Was he a prince, a cardinal, or a diamond merchant, or what? His distinguished self-assurance, his unconscious humility before another perfect aspect of nature, the suggestion of power in his features, handsome and impressive in total, if not in separate detail, made Adriaen long to know him. Adriaen laughed to himself. Perhaps the man was only a very successful forger, or the head of the local inquisition—though the Spaniards seemed to be as well hated here as elsewhere. Then he recognized the horse. Yes, he had seen that horse somewhere before—but where, in God's name? It was a familiar horse, a horse which was part, somehow, of his mental furniture. He searched his mind furiously, feeling the answer almost there, but not quite. This was certainly the wrong way to remember anything; let him think of something else. He edged slowly nearer. The man was rapt. He had not moved, except with his horse. Adriaen suddenly started. Of course, it was the horse on which Rubens's princes and generals and soldiers rode, whether in stately portraits, or in artificial prancings over superb fields of battle, or tumultuously mounting to the heights of Calvary. Adriaen turned towards him with a smile. But at the same moment the man gave a twitch to his reins and trotted off, taking no more notice of Adriaen than of any other detail in the darkening landscape.

II

The mild weather continued. Snowdrops had come up at the foot of trees, and crocuses were beginning to appear, like brushfuls of white and yellow paint. There

were soft skies above the roofs, the chimneys seemed warm friendly groups of sculpture, and the waters of the harbour, no longer opaque, grey-green wastes, reflected the lines of shipping. Adriaen was blissful in hard-working solitude.

As he stood by his window mixing colours one morning, he heard horses' hoofs. Two men were dismounting in the street below, one of whom wore a long crimson cloak, and a crowd of urchins was gathering, eager to earn a stiver by holding the horses. Adriaen chuckled. In the old days he would have been one of this curious crowd, though more likely to give a whack to the horses' rumps and send them careering away; and now the prince of painters was coming to see him, while his real social equals looked on. A comic, topsy-turvy situation! What would not Adriaen Van Ostade have given to be in his place now? Even Frans would have sent poor Lysbeth bustling round, whilst he put out his best canvases and arranged himself in the most telling attitude. Rubens—calling on him!

'Mijnheer Brouwer?'

'Mijnheer Brouwer.'

'Is it convenient for you to receive Sir Peter Rubens?'

'If it isn't inconvenient for him to walk up all these stairs.'

'He has already almost done so.'

Adriaen put down his palette. Footsteps outside. Some grunts. A knock, and the door opened without waiting for an answer.

'By the Mass, it's a long climb for an old gouty man up to your studio, Monsieur Brouwer!'

'And I am grateful to you for doing it.'

The attendant slipped quietly out of the room, and

Rubens strode forward to seize both Adriaen's paint-covered hands.

'Welcome to Antwerp, Brouwer!'

'Welcome to my studio, Sir Rubens! It's a lousy sort of place, I fear.'

Rubens laughed lightly and pleasantly, but his brown eyes, shining and excited, were taking swift note of Adriaen, penetrating beneath the outer layers of dirt, and evidently liking what they saw. Adriaen was struck by the impressive healthiness of the man, the vigorous mobility of his clear-cut features, emphasized rather than obscured by the light brown waving hair of his beard and moustaches. Only the skin about his eyes was old, the rest of it was that of a man at his prime. His nose was big, but shapely. His mouth pursed, sensitive, appraising. The grip of his white hands was friendly and strong. He was taller than Adriaen. His opulent black velvet was slashed over finest white linen, and the lace at his throat was spotlessly clean. Adriaen thought—Here at last is a man whose friendship would be a privilege. After all the third-rate creatures with whom he had passed his life, Rubens's presence was almost a shock.

'I collect beautiful things, Brouwer, and I have several of your pictures. Antwerp will one day be grateful for your presence, as it is for mine. But, from all the accounts I hear, you waste your health and the talent in nightly orgies. You cannot do your best work under such conditions, and our art has not enough masters that it can afford to lose the best work of one of them. Now, will you show me what you are doing?'

It was said in such a kindly, concerned way, like the reprimand of an affectionate father, that Adriaen at

once felt surprisingly guilty, and at the same time respectful towards the man who could say such a thing to him with such an unusual result.

Rubens was looking at the canvas on his easel with the same absorption as he had looked at the evening sky the other night on the ramparts. And again Adriaen noticed a certain looseness of body in curious contrast to the general impression of brisk majesty. The man was not all perfection, evidently. Adriaen wanted to know him more and more thoroughly.

Rubens suddenly took a brush, and with a few quick strokes altered the modelling of a fold, and Adriaen was surprised at his rightness. Then he took a piece of rough paper and swiftly analysed the composition, so that Adriaen saw at once where he had made mistakes and where he had done unexpectedly well. He learnt more in five minutes than he had done in five months with Hals. Then they began to compare notes. Adriaen felt himself being drawn on. Though Rubens talked with authority, he also listened with respectful if critical attention. From painting they went on to discuss painters, books, music, and men. Adriaen learned of Rubens's years in Italy, and his diplomatic travels, his opinions of different schools of painting, his dislike of the Dutch and the very puritanical or very loose-living English, the diamond ring which King Charles of England had given him, his efforts to bring peace to the Netherlands, his collections of sculpture, gems, and cameos, the alterations he was making to his house in the Place de Meir, his dealings at the Court of Brussels, his duties as secretary to the Privy Council, and his sufferings from gout.

He talked with animation, and Adriaen was sorry when he got up to go.

'I must be about my business and you must paint. I have taken up far too much of your time, but I have enjoyed our talk.'

'You talk well, Sir Rubens. We all like to talk about ourselves. So few of us dare for fear of being bores, and those who can do so and yet be interesting can be counted on the fingers of two hands.'

He smiled, but Rubens stared at him—not certain how to take the remark. Adriaen wondered if the great man could be deficient in humour. Perhaps he was. It would be disappointing, but it might account for his greatness.

'You will come and visit me at my house in the Place de Meir? I have many things to show you. I should like you to meet my wife and my children, and there are many there who would be interested to see you. I have my hours for receiving visitors. There must be strict routine in a life as full as mine—but you will be welcome at any time.'

'Thank you. I shall be very glad to come. But I have no beautiful visiting clothes, as you see.'

'The outward man is of no importance to me—though I myself have a certain position to keep up.'

He looked down at his own clothes.

'But your wife?'

Rubens smiled, and his eyes sparkled.

'My wife thinks as I do on all matters. And now, good-bye. I am delighted that you have come to our city.'

Adriaen watched him toss a handful of coins to the urchins, jump into the saddle, and clatter away, waving a hand in response to a shrill cheer, sitting his horse like a king. God's love! It would be fun to see this man at work, amongst his family and friends, above all

in his lighter moments. A most unusual person, but there was something in him that Adriaen could not understand—and he wanted badly to understand, to have the friendship of the whole man. He was—Adriaen hoped, almost prayed—not so entirely perfect as he seemed. Adriaen took up the composition sketch which Rubens had made. It was vigorous and brilliant, and his own effort filled him with dissatisfaction. He took it off the easel and threw it away into a corner.

III

Adriaen pulled the bell-rope hanging in the wide ornate porch of Rubens's mansion, and a clangour like the tocsin of Breda echoed through the grounds and across acres of roofs. He felt like a distinguished ambassador paying a state visit. He felt less like a distinguished ambassador when the two elaborate flunkeys, who answered the bell before it had stopped resounding, slammed the great doors in his face after one look. He laughed and walked along a paved path by a lawn, until he found another, smaller door. This opened and he walked in, finding himself in a long corridor with white busts of ancient philosophers looking benignly down on him with eyeball-less eyes. He put out his tongue at them, pulled aside some curtains at the end, and was in a vast, round, high room lit by tall windows, with big glass cabinets equally spaced between marble statuary and the windows, black and white diamond-shaped tiles on the floor, and a windowed dome in the centre. It was like the interior of a cathedral. Underneath the central dome on a dais stood a marble figure, presumably of Venus. On carved oak chairs with crimson plush seats and backs

sat about thirty young men drawing in busy, reverent silence, while the Venus postured coldly above them. Adriaen looked into one of the cabinets. It was full of cornelians of all sizes, neatly arranged, and labelled with the date and place of acquisition in a handwriting of great beauty. He strolled across to the students, and looked over the shoulder of one of them. It was quite a promising copy. The next one's drawing was not good. He seemed to be in difficulties. He felt Adriaen's presence above him.

'Master,' he murmured, 'this arm. I don't see how . . .'

Adriaen took the paper and crayon from him and made a drawing of the arm. The student's eyes eagerly followed the crayon. Then they wandered to the fingers that held it, and opened rather wide. Since when had the master allowed his fingers to be dirty and their nails broken and unkempt? The sleeves, too, ragged and filthy. He looked up quickly.

'And what the devil are you doing here?'

Adriaen felt a great many eyes suddenly fixed disapprovingly on him.

'You asked me to show you how to draw that arm, so I showed you.'

'I—I thought you were the master. Who are you?'

'A poor lousy painter.'

'Go away! The master will be furious if he knows we have been disturbed. Go to the kitchen and do your begging there. The master—'

'The master? Yes, I want to see him.'

'You—see the master!'

A general laugh.

'I know it 's funny, but I do want to see him. Where will he be?'

'Through those curtains. But he 's working. He won't want to be disturbed. I should advise you not——'

But Adriaen was already walking away across the shining tiled floor. He pulled aside long, heavily embroidered curtains, and he was in Rubens's atelier. It was a smaller edition of the room from which he had come, but just as orderly and cool and beautiful and decorous, with none of the dirt and untidiness of the usual studio. Rubens was seated with his back to him in front of a canvas the size of the wall of any ordinary room, slashing a deep, rich, oily, transparent glaze across a mass of outlined, writhing figures and sweeping vegetation, at the same time dictating a letter in French to a secretary scribbling at a desk. Standing at a window, looking out, was another man clasping a book behind his back. Adriaen glanced at the title—*The Works of Seneca*.

Adriaen tiptoed nearer. Nobody had noticed him, and he wanted to watch Rubens's every action. Not even Frans worked as rapidly and as certainly as this. The eye measured, the hand and arm moved with the lightning skill of an expert swordsman intent on finishing off his opponent. The glaze laid on, solid pigment was built into it while still wet, bold lines of colour were massed side by side, and delicately fused with the brush. Then a few decisive touches made the whole thing leap into vigorous life and significance. Adriaen was panting with astonished excitement. This reckless assurance, the result of years of experience and knowledge, this partnership of brilliant skill and the volcanic outpouring of a mind on fire was a most thrilling experience—and all the time the level voice went on dictating melodious periods with an excellent French accent. The man was a god or a devil.

At length the secretary took up his papers, bowed, and walked out, and Rubens said:

'Please continue with the *Seneca*.'

The man in the window turned, but stopped with an 'Oh!'

'What's the matter?'

'A stranger, master, in your studio!'

Rubens swung round on his seat, frowning.

'Oh, it's you! However, I am glad to see you. Go now, Cornelis, thank you. I will send for you if I want you again.'

The reader bowed and retired.

'Come and talk to me, Brouwer.'

'I would rather watch you paint. It fascinates me.'

'It fascinates me while I am doing it. When I have finished this shadow I must go and see how my pupils are doing. They are quite promising. You will dine with me shortly—a very light meal. I never allow the vapours of heavy food and drink to interfere with my work. And you will sup with me later. There will be my family and a few friends. Van der Bosch, whom I believe you know. He first told me you were in Antwerp. The Fourments, my parents-in-law, the Brants, the family of my first wife, my chaplain, and some foreigners who are passing through Antwerp. One is always entertaining foreigners if one is a diplomat. But by the Mass, I'm tired of this diplomacy!'

'Systematic grabbing.'

'The more I work for the peace of our wretched country, the further off it seems. I'm getting old now, and I've a great many pictures I want to paint before I die. But these accursed commissions are such a hindrance. Every one wants the same sort of subject, and it's so hard to think of a new design. I want

leisure and peace to paint my own ideas, and live my own life.'

'I agree, but it's seldom possible. One is always being dragged into other people's lives.'

'And yours is such a slipshod one, Brouwer. It's wickedly wrong. Moderation, restraint, these should rule a man's life. They have ruled mine, and I have almost always succeeded. Have you no religion?'

'None.'

'I see we look at the world from utterly different standpoints.'

'Yet both our standpoints are pagan.'

'That may be true. Perhaps that is why I like you. . . . There, that is done for the moment. Is it good?'

'Devilish good! I am wild with envy!'

Rubens laughed—a pleasant noise, but a little self-satisfied.

'Come, I will show you my assistants at work, my gems, statues, and pictures; also you might be interested in my pupils.'

'I have been. But my interest was not returned.'

'Indeed?'

'You see, your lackeys threw me out—not unnaturally—so I had to come in by another entrance and walked right in on to your students. They liked me about as much as your lackeys.'

Rubens laughed again, put away his brushes tidily, and washed his hands in a basin of rose-water.

They went into another vast studio, where five or six obviously skilled artists were at work on more huge canvases.

'I design the picture,' Rubens explained, 'these men copy it to my instructions, I put the finishing touches

and sign it. Without this system I could not possibly fulfil all my obligations.'

Adriaen was horrified. Yet here was this prince of painters and his workmen, each of whom could and did command respectable prices, complacently taking for granted this—this picture factory! It was a curious mutual prostitution.

IV

Adriaen came to the conclusion that wealth might after all be worth while if you could always have such good things to eat. He also found the food a convenient topic of conversation with Hélène, Rubens's wife. He had tried her on every conceivable subject from painting, in which he presumed she might have been interested, to peacocks, of which a number strutted in their garden. But she had only looked at him sideways out of timorous, vapid, blue eyes and replied in unmusical monosyllables, until he had congratulated her upon her cooks. She then became quite talkative, telling him how the various dishes were made, with what ingredients, and who had first told her of them, reporting their conversations in full, with not unilluminating sidelights on the characters of her informants. While she prattled, Adriaen wondered why her husband had married this girl of seventeen. He was one of the highest in the land, by achievement, if not by birth. He was nearly old enough to be her grandfather. She was clearly unintelligent, if not actually stupid, and could be no companion for him. Of course she was connected with the Brants, his former parents-in-law, and they made a little happy

group together; she came of a reputable and wealthy bourgeois family; he was a wonderful match for any girl, especially as in a few years' time she might be left exceedingly rich; she obviously looked up to him with venerating admiration, and, as he had said, his every thought (when she could follow it) was hers also, which would bore Adriaen intensely, but might be flattering to her husband; she was an affectionate stepmother to the two boys — handsome, healthy, wicked-looking young animals; and finally she made a pleasant enough picture with her high colouring, her full lips, her plump, well-shaped face, her mass of elaborately dressed hair, her placid, kind expression, her full, lifted bosom, and the mass of jewellery and rich silks which he liked her to wear. Yes, perhaps that was it—she was just a body. But what did a man like Rubens want with just a body?

Rubens talked, and the colony of Brants and Fourments, whom he had honoured with his marriages, listened respectfully, and when he ceased, put in a remark to start him off again. They were solid, hearty, honest folk, the men rightly pleased with themselves, the women justifiably proud of their men. Van der Bosch, delicate and distinguished, with his death's-head handsomeness, did his best to entertain Rubens's foreigners for him. Unobtrusive flunkeys saw that their plates and glasses were always full, and wink as he would at the two men who had shut the door in his face, Adriaen could get no response out of them. Even when he loudly told Hélène the story of his reception their expressions did not alter, though she was embarrassed.

Adriaen did not drink much, though the Vin d'Ay was good, if not particularly potent. He did not want

to anger his fastidious host too early. He was bound to irritate him sooner or later, and he wanted to understand him first and cement their friendship. After supper he sang to them, and both Rubens and his wife were pleased to compliment him on his voice. But he was soon tired of behaving himself, and took his leave with enthusiastic invitations from his host and hostess. As he walked to his attic he tried to puzzle out the problem of Rubens.

Supremacy in painting would satisfy most men. Why all this diplomatic intrigue and political office-hunting? Knowledge of languages could be enjoyed in foreign literature, power over men proved in ordinary social intercourse. And this fetish of restraint and moderation, this religious lip-service? Yet the man painted glowing canvases full of fury, cruelty, and lust, Christian as well as pagan, even though he had married almost a granddaughter.

It was all intensely interesting. Thank God he had come to Antwerp!

CHAPTER XIV

PORTRAIT OF A PRISONER

I

ADRIAEN's other home was 'The Sign of the Sailor of Rotterdam.' Here he drank brandy, sketched, and took refuge from the polite society which he had to endure if he wanted to be with Rubens. The dingy little room, filled with smoke and stench and chance collections of the shouting scum of all nations, provided him with inspiration and was a stimulating contrast to the quiet, ordered elegance of the Rubens household. Beauty had its roots in the earth, though its branches were raised to the sky. Life might be clean superficially, but it was good rich dirt underneath. Earthiness certainly inspired Rubens's art.

He left 'The Sailor of Rotterdam,' whistling, threw a stiver to the beggar at the door, and was still whistling half an hour later when the lackey held aside the heavy curtains shutting off Rubens's private atelier. He swaggered in, throwing the lackey a stiver, which was kicked indignantly into a corner. Rubens was leaning over a table looking at some papers with a childishly fair, clean-shaven, rather sheepish-looking man. Rubens glanced up, frowning, and then smiled.

'Oh, it's only you.'

'Good morning, Peter Paul. And how many yards of naked flesh have you painted this morning?'

'Come and look at these sketches which my engraver

here has just finished. Du Pont, this is my friend Adriaen Brouwer.'

Du Pont bowed respectfully, clutching his hat nervously to his stomach. One of the great man's minions, Adriaen thought.

'Don't bow to me, Mijnheer du Pont; I am the meanest of men, though no very bad painter. However, any one of my pictures would fit into the mouth of one of Peter Paul's satyrs.'

'A picture is judged on its quality alone, Adriaen.' Rubens was quite serious.

Du Pont gazed at Rubens as if his every word was a pearl of wisdom from the ancient philosophers, and at Adriaen in hurt puzzlement that any one so disreputable-looking should dare to be so familiar with the master.

'These have come out well, du Pont. I am pleased.'

'Thank you, master.'

Rubens stroked his soft curly beard. Adriaen noticed grey hairs for the first time, though the ringed fingers which stroked were still young.

'I'd like your opinion, Adriaen.'

Adriaen looked at the sketches. Lovely violence in miniature. The man was master of nature's forces, whether expressed in a tree or a torso, on a tiny scale or on an immense one.

'I believe this medium suits you almost best, Peter Paul. Your characteristic vigour is even more pronounced from the restraint necessary in such a small space.'

'I enjoy doing them, certainly. But—Aah! You must excuse me if I sit down—my gout is bad to-day. My "domestic enemy," you know—the only one, God be praised!'

He sank into a chair, du Pont assiduously helping. He was smiling, with hard set lines round his mouth. His eyes, screwed up into the surrounding wrinkles, looked suddenly old, and his healthy flesh seemed baggy, while mauve veins stood up from the hands clutching the arms of his chair. Adriaen felt a gush of admiration and affection for this creator, as magnificent in some ways as his creations. He could not help murmuring:

‘You are another Michelangelo, Peter Paul.’

Rubens’s eyes opened wide and flashed with joy, and the taut lines of his smile relaxed in genuine pleasure at the compliment. But du Pont was fussing round, rather jealous, Adriaen felt, of his master’s new upstart friend with the glib tongue.

‘Master, I do trust it is not bad. May I not send for your physician? Perhaps you will rest for a while? You have been at work since dawn—you are tired, let me help you to——’

Rubens’s smile was fixed again as he interrupted du Pont: ‘Certainly not! There is much work to be done. My painters and my pupils have to be seen to. Gout shall not beat me.’

‘But, master——’

‘Peter Paul,’ Adriaen broke in to stop this irritating little busybody, ‘I want you to do something for me. One of my many creditors won’t believe that a picture I have made over to him on account is really by me. Now, you have in your collection another one of a similar subject—a man having a boil on his shoulder pierced by the barber—and I have to swear before some corpulent old bastard of a notary that you——’

‘A messenger for your excellency.’

The lackey held aside the curtain. A man, out

of breath, in heavy cloak, boots, and spurs, bowed low.

'Sir Peter—I have ridden hard to tell you the news. You are one of the first to know.'

'What news?'

'Isabella—is dead!'

'The Infanta?'

'Dead.'

'But when?'

'Early this morning. The States have been summoned.'

'God rest her soul.'

Rubens crossed himself. Du Pont crossed himself. The messenger crossed himself. Adriaen started to, but forgot the motions half-way through.

'So now the Netherlands return to Spain.'

'We are all in God's hands, Sir Peter.'

'And the Spaniards' apparently,' Adriaen murmured. 'And for a lousy, domineering lot of braggarts, give me—'

'Hush!' Rubens glared at him. 'You'll get yourself into trouble. Now. You must leave me, Adriaen, du Pont. I have much to do. Ah, curse this gout!'

'Master—'

'Go away, please.'

The painter had become the diplomat, and the only visible alternation was the fixed, hard smile with which both Peter Pauls faced physical pain.

'Send those engravings to the Moretus Press, du Pont. Come and see me again soon, Adriaen. You, sir, come into my work cabinet, if you please. Now, tell me details of the Infanta. . . .'

Adriaen went out through the curtains, followed by

du Pont, into the large rotunda where the pupils were drawing a bronze Mercury.

'You can go, my children,' he said airily. 'The master is too busy to attend to you. The Infanta is dead.'

The pupils gazed up at him for a moment, then hubbub broke out, and some of them crowded round him. But he waved them away and passed on to what he called the 'Rubens Picture Factory.'

'Good morning, dear brothers. The Infanta is dead. Cross yourselves like good Christians, and go on with your work.'

'What d' you mean . . . when did she? . . .'

In the porch he met Hélène returning from a stroll in the gardens, her face flushed from her exercise. Though she was cosseted in furs, he could see clearly that she was with child.

'Good morning, Mevrouw Rubens. You look admirable. The Infanta is dead. And your Infanta is not yet born.'

'Dead, Monsieur Brouwer?—Ah, but don't go. Stay and . . .'

The lackey opened the door. Adriaen tossed him another stiver, and passed out into the gardens. What is the good of being a success like Peter Paul? he wondered. When he wants to paint he has to be a politician, and when he wants to gloat over his possessions or play the family man his pupils clamour for him in the rotunda, or his workmen in the factory want his signature to a picture before it is sent off to some archduke, whose warlike achievements the peace-loving diplomat has had to commemorate. Yet, with it all he can be genuinely interested in a wastrel like Adriaen Brouwer. . . .

He strolled into ‘The Sailor of Rotterdam,’ and was greeted with a welcoming shout. He demanded brandy. The host brought it and asked for payment at once. Adriaen referred him to Sir Peter Rubens. Then he called out:

‘My friends. News for you. I have come straight from Rubens’s house. The Infanta is dead! ’

‘Who the devil ’s he?’

‘He ’s a she, not a he. She governs us—or rather did, until early this morning. And now the Netherlands revert to Spain.’

‘What ’s the Netherlands?’

‘Really, you ’re making it very difficult for me to break this news to you dramatically. This is part of the Netherlands, anyhow, and we are all in Spain’s hands from now on. Calvinists, beware! I ’ve had experience of these Spaniards, and they ’re as infamous a lot of damned bastards as you ’ll ever meet. Any of you Spanish, by the way? Well, then, I drink once more to the damnation of Spain, and may its most Christian king swell with a dropsy until he bursts into a million little pieces, each of which goes to poison one of his devilish subjects!’

He drained off his mug. The toast was drunk heartily, if unwittingly. The other men crowded round him, eager for his usual jokes. Mugs were filled and refilled. But instead of laughter Adriaen gave them his Breda stories. The more he drank the more dramatic he became, and the more excited his audience grew. At length, emboldened with drink, they all marched out of the tavern, Adriaen at their head, through the streets and up towards the Spanish fortress, yelling: ‘Down with the Spaniards! To the devil with the most Christian king!’

II

At dawn Adriaen was woken up suddenly and with great violence, hoisted to his feet, and held there, blinking drunkenly at the glow of early light on his bare attic walls. Dark, sallow faces leered into his. . . . Elegant uniforms and gleaming helmets, halberds with brilliant rosettes.

'You are Adriaen Brouwer, a painter?' said a voice in execrable Dutch.

'Adriaen Brouwer, *the* painter.'

'You blasphemed against His Most Christian Majesty of Spain.'

'True—if blasphemy is the word. Need this man breathe so much garlic in my face?'

'You are Dutch?'

'How did you guess?'

'Where's your passport?'

'Never had one.'

'Ah! As we thought—a spy.'

'Anything you wish. And now can I go back to sleep?'

'No. You are coming with us to the fortress. Search the room.'

'Search as much as you like. Meanwhile, can I sit down?'

'No! Prick him with a halberd if he attempts to move.'

'Can I scratch?'

A few minutes were enough for the search. At the officer's feet were laid painting apparatus, some oddments of shabby clothing, including a black cloth cloak, a pair of sleeves, one collar, two and a half pairs of cuffs but no shirt, a wooden lay figure, a dagger, a few

pictures, twelve engravings, eight books, and a map of the siege of Breda.

'Ha! A map of Breda! So you fought there against us? What further proof is needed? A spy and a dangerous enemy. Bring him along.'

'Can I take my painting things?'

'H'm. Yes, I suppose so. Soldier, bring them with you.'

'Very well, my commander. And that?' pointing to the lay figure.

'I'll give you that,' Adriaen murmured. 'You can cuddle it in bed.'

'Now then—march!'

'One moment, my commander. I wish to be sick.'

III

After a few days in the Spanish fortress Adriaen found himself more comfortable and at ease than ever before. The fortress itself consisted of a large space of hard, baked earth, surrounded by ramparts and various buildings, unrelieved with trees or flowers—a forbidding, typically military place. It was entirely self-supporting, and contained, amongst other shops, a tavern, where duty-free Spanish wines could be obtained. In consequence this tavern was well patronized by the people of Antwerp, who managed to sneak in, in spite of the penalty of heavy fines. All the shops were owned by Flemings and were hereditary in their families—they were far too profitable to let slip into other hands. These tradesmen were a grasping, taciturn, cautious lot, as became those who had to keep a foot in two mutually exclusive camps—Spanish and Antwerpian.

The garrison, having little to do except sentry duty, attendance at Mass, and shooting practice, and being detested by the townsfolk, were forced back on to the resources of the fortress, especially the tavern. Three-quarters of the garrison were drunk each night, every one gambled, and the surgeons were kept busy binding up knife-wounds. The officers, when sober, dared not interfere. Better this nightly shambles than a mutiny caused by excessive boredom.

The few prisoners were perfectly free to do what they chose, providing they were present at the two daily roll-calls, and did not try to escape—if they did, Adriaen was told, they would be mercilessly shot down. They were not even locked in their cells, which were small and bare, though they were allowed to make them as comfortable as they liked. Adriaen, using his name as credit, provided himself with bed and blankets, made himself a little studio, and was rather more comfortable than usual, owing to the solidity and dryness of the building. He could paint all day, and drink and play the fool all night—a perfect existence. He wisely determined that, loathsome though the Spaniards were, it would be good policy to be boon-companion with them. Most of them talked a little Dutch or Flemish. He was as wild as any of them and far more resourceful and entertaining, and he was soon well known and well liked. No one seemed to think of bringing him to trial. His only trouble was the payment for his food and drink, but he freely used the names of influential people, and the tradesmen grudgingly gave way.

He had visitors from outside—patrons who wanted his pictures, or creditors who wanted his money. Both encouraged him not to waste his time in debauchery, but to paint and satisfy every one, including himself.

Van der Bosch came most often, worried about some thousand florins owing to him, and Adriaen cheerfully signed promissory notes. Van der Bosch blew sand over his signature and looked at it mournfully, scratching his thin cheek with a long finger-nail.

'I am wondering what that signature of yours is worth, Adriaen.'

'So am I.'

'I'd like to get you out of here.'

'I'm perfectly happy.'

Van der Bosch sighed and changed the subject.

'Sir Peter Rubens sends his condolences to you. He has been making efforts for your release.'

'Thank him. Tell him I'd like to see him.'

'He is extremely busy—especially as the Archduke Ferdinand is to make his *joyeuse entrée* into the town shortly, and Sir Peter is to design all the decorations, shows, and theatres.'

'He undertakes too much. Yet, I admire him immensely. At times I almost love him. Any other news from outside?'

'The war drags on. We are in the hands of Spain. So-and-so has been killed in battle or put to death, therefore Madame So-and-so is a weeping widow, while Monsieur So-and-so lays siege to her heart—the usual story.'

'The usual story—and an uncomfortable reflection on Peter Paul's peace-making.'

'There has been an outbreak of the plague at the far end of the town.'

'Serious?'

'Not as yet. It is believed to have been brought in from Rotterdam. There have been a few deaths, but only amongst artisans. No great cause for fear yet.'

'Except amongst the artisans.'

'I must go. I have business. You must pay me back, Adriaen. I'm not made of money.'

'I hope to, Mijnheer,' Adriaen answered, smiling. Van der Bosch considered him.

'How I wish I could understand that mocking smile of yours!'

'It just expresses an affection for you and ridiculous humanity.'

After about six months Adriaen was released owing to the efforts of Van der Bosch, Rubens, and other influential friends. The night before he was due to go he gave a large farewell feast. Next day he and his belongings were carried out to Van der Bosch's coach, which was waiting for him. Van der Bosch kept him for a week, but regretfully threw him out, after finding him sprawling pipe-drunk on his doorstep, when he said good-bye to some guests. Rubens kept him for two days, but really had to get rid of him when he was found drinking with the servants and lackeys and boasting that he was the father of Hélène's child. Rubens persuaded the du Ponts to take him into their house in the Everdijkstraat, promising to pay for his keep. Du Pont, delighted to have an opportunity of pleasing the master and earning a little extra money, accepted. Adriaen, being heavily in debt, went.

CHAPTER XV

PORTRAIT OF A FAMILY MAN

I

CHRISTIANA DU PONT ruled the household in the Everdijkstraat with a quiet, sweet good humour which enveloped every one, and even partially enslaved Adriaen. He found himself washing dishes for her, going to market, and scrubbing floors, when he badly wanted to paint, enjoying it and laughing at himself. Yet when he teasingly accused her of kindly tyranny, she was so sincere in her denials that her grey eyes filled with tears and he had to kiss her plump cheeks. It was a difficult household to rule, and only a woman who was practical, affectionate, and simple, and who considered each member of it as a more or less complicated child divinely entrusted to her special care, could have managed so successfully. Her husband, Paul, worshipped her in his amiable, humble, rather futile way, though always insistent that he was master in his wife's perfectly kept house. Adriaen could not decide which of his two masters du Pont worshipped most—Rubens or his wife. Perhaps Rubens, for he dared not be peevish to him, as he frequently was to Christiana, especially when he was not well. Christiana was devoted to her Paul, the most delicate and difficult of her family. She had never felt passionately towards him—as he had, in his ineffectual way, towards her—and had obviously married him as a decent creature to

be the father of her children, though Adriaen believed that her normal red-hot glow of maternal love might be fanned to a white heat. Her two little girls, Isabella—named, characteristically, after the late Infanta—aged ten, and Gabrielle, aged five, were simple, dark, happy, energetic creatures like her, absorbed in everlasting games with their own children, many of which Adriaen found himself making, repairing, and painting, when he wanted to be at his easel. One servant-girl, Jannetje, helped with the housework. Jannetje had the face of a tired monkey, and did everything she could in the house, from emptying the slops to helping du Pont with his engraving, for sheer love of work and her mistress. Finally, there was handsome old Monsieur Herselin, Christiana's father, who owned the house, and attempted to tyrannize over its inhabitants, between bouts of rheumatism. Only Christiana's persistent tact prevented bitter misunderstandings between her father and the rest of her household. But there was usually peace, and peace of a deep sweetness, which was new in Adriaen's experience, and which drugged at first more deliciously than tobacco or brandy. And the woman from whom this peace flowed looked young, but might have been any age, pleasant always, pretty sometimes, plain scarcely ever. She was the first woman, except for his mother and possibly Lysbeth Hals, whom Adriaen could genuinely admire. And he fell quite happily for a time into the ordered rhythm of their lives.

Paul du Pont was a snob, and Christiana would give sedate little supper parties to the second flight of painters and the middle-class hangers-on of the artistic and literary worlds. Feeling dead tired after coping all day with her children, her home, her husband's

cold, and her father's tantrums, she would preside over a table of delicacies, hectically finished by herself an hour before. She would listen charmingly while Monsieur Herselin laid down the law on subjects of which he knew nothing, her embarrassed husband tried to out-talk him, their guests laughed up their sleeves, and Jannetje waited on them, silently, shrewdly summing them all up, to make her mistress roar with laughter at her comments as they polished the pewter and copper next day. Adriaen longed to shock them with scandalous stories from the richness of his experience, but refrained, thinking of Christiana. Instead he was silent, until he caught her beseeching eyes, when he would talk about Frans Hals or Rubens, as being what Christiana wanted because her art-snob of a Paul wanted it. But he soon noticed that du Pont objected to him talking about Rubens. Rubens was exclusively du Pont's subject. It must have given him great satisfaction that they were both called Paul, Adriaen reflected. He once told humorous stories about the members of St. Luke's Guild of Painters and the Antwerp Literary Society, to both of which Rubens had secured his election, but at Christiana's startled, unhappy look he guessed that these were both unrealized ambitions of her husband's, and, for her sake, stopped. And once he tried out his favourite theories about art, ending:

'Yes, you know, most of us paint the same peasants really. Some put 'em round a cross. I put 'em round a card-table or a pot of ale. That's the only difference.' But the du Ponts blushed and looked down their noses. Conversation at meals was sometimes difficult.

His circle of friends increased, mostly painters, many of them working for Rubens. Among these was David

Teniers, who, he was amused to find, was a Brouwer disciple. Together they visited the taverns by the harbour, the local fairs, the barbers' shops, observing, sketching, drinking, and sometimes working up their results into the same picture. Teniers was a cheerful, calculating person, with a good business head, and he sold their pictures far better than Adriaen would have bothered to do, so Adriaen was able to pay some of his creditors—to Van der Bosch's intense surprise. Teniers was in love with Anna—a ward of Rubens, and a descendant of old Pieter Breughel. In his company Adriaen was tempted to break out into wildness, and especially to visit the fortress again. He did not often succumb, remembering Christiana, and laughing at himself as he resisted the temptation. When he did succumb, he contrived to remain sufficiently sober to enter the house quietly—always to find candles ready for him, with perhaps a bowl of hot soup, a saucer over it to keep it warm. But he wondered how long this good behaviour would last.

II

There was a little orchard-garden at the back of the du Ponts' house. In late September marigolds and tall sunflowers grew in front of the stone walls. Apple trees sprang out of the long grass, which was surrounded by a paved path. This garden was of course Christiana's creation. Paul had no time for gardening, though appreciative of the results. Adriaen loved it, and brought his work outside when practicable. The children's endless games went on here, and he wished frequently that he had the more catholic gifts of a Hals so that he could paint them at play.

He lay in the grass looking up at the sky, which showed a deeper blue between the pale leaves of the apple trees. Du Pont was out, of course, on important business for the master. Herselin was asleep in his room. Jannetje was repairing a broken window. Christiana had been gone to market some time, and had left him in charge of Isabella and Gabrielle. Clad in long green dresses, looking like little miniature women, they had spent hours in collecting the fallen yellow apples from the grass into baskets and carrying them to one corner of the garden. Then, when the pile was big enough, they carried it load by load to the opposite corner. They worked with large-eyed seriousness, in silence mostly, except when Isabella, as the elder, shouted directions in her slow, deep, stuttering voice: 'Here 's a new apple fallen down, Ga-Ga-Ga-Gabrielle. Put it in your basket, for our mo-mo-mo-mother to make her cider.' The sunlight slanted down into the garden, shimmering amongst the apple trees, outlining some leaves with a golden halo, making others greenly transparent, and lying in pools on the grass, turning each separate blade into a sword of pale flame. The bees hummed in the sunflowers. An old gull looked meditatively on from the roof of the house.

Adriaen turned over, to smile at the intense seriousness of this business of playing. But, after all, he thought, the artist is precisely the same. I play about with paints and brushes and they with apples. They are creating a lovely caricature of everyday life. So do I. They are usually successful, knowing their limitations. They obtain the greater contentment, for I am perpetually dissatisfied with my results, especially since seeing Peter Paul at work. But there must be something within me which is supremely satisfied at the way

in which I am spending this afternoon, something which I have starved. And I thought I knew myself! Once again a woman affects my life—curse them all! Marry? Have children? Spend innumerable such happy afternoons? But think of all the thousand little worries—and I should have to find another Christiana. Impossible. How the devil did that lucky and undeserving du Pont manage to discover this one? Perhaps it is better to enjoy it all at second hand as I am doing.

Isabella's voice broke into his thoughts. 'A-A-Adriaen, come and be the man who buys our apples to make ci-ci-cider with!'

Then Gabrielle's little snub nose and large dark eyes, with their egg-shell-blue whites, were within an inch or two of his face.

'Come and buy our apples to make cider with!' she echoed, for she adored Isabella to the point of slavish imitation. Isabella, being maternally minded, did not object to this.

Adriaen pulled Gabrielle down on top of him and started tickling her and making hen noises. She resisted at first, still absorbed in the atmosphere of her game. Then the tickling and the exact imitation of a hen laying an egg took effect, and she began that rich, chuckling laugh which Adriaen loved.

But Isabella was angry at this unintelligent adult interruption.

'Oh, A-A-Adriaen, leave her alone! You're spoiling it all! Do come and be the ci-ci-cider man!'

Brought to her senses again, Gabrielle struggled furiously to get up. 'You're spoiling me, Adriaen.'

He let her go and sat up. There was Christiana, basket over arm, smiling down at them. Gabrielle ran off immediately and the apple game continued.

'Christiana,' he cried, 'will you sit for me, with Gabrielle? A "Madonna and Child." The first and only religious picture by Adriaen Brouwer.'

'Heaven, no! I haven't time for sitting still.'

'Oh, please, Christiana—you must!'

'Well—I'll think about it. . . . These two seem quite happy.'

'Your children have been as lovely as the garden in which they are playing.'

Christiana smiled at him.

'You'd make a good father, Adriaen.'

'I doubt it. God's love, I wish I could!'

But she suddenly grew rather red, turned quickly, and hurried indoors. Adriaen watched her, wondering.

III

The du Ponts had their troubles that winter. It was a hard winter. Trade was bad, and there was not enough food and much suffering. Christiana went about with full baskets to poor old people of her acquaintance. But du Pont started a heavy cough, and Christiana had to give up her charitable journeys to nurse him, sending Adriaen instead. Worse still, du Pont gave his cough to the children. Isabella had a weak chest, too, and the physician came every day, in spite of Herselin's protests against such waste of money. But no one listened, so in a fit of irritation he proclaimed that the weather had made his rheumatism worse and also took to his bed. Christiana sighed slightly and set about coping with yet another invalid. Jannetje was thoroughly happy, doing as much work as could be crammed into the hours between dawn and midnight, muttering, and

reviling both husband and father to Christiana. Adriaen tried to help, got in the way, and was thankful to be sworn at so that he could go back to his painting, or play with the children.

Paul recovered first and dragged wretchedly about the house, unable to settle to work. Then Jannetje told Herselin that he was much better and should get up. He answered that he was still very bad indeed, and described his symptoms in detail. Jannetje told him he would probably die soon. Herselin replied that he hoped he would, got up and crawled downstairs, grumbling at the general lack of sympathy and the poor spiritedness of his son-in-law. Christiana was cheerful, pallid, and worn out, and Adriaen and Jannetje forced her to stay in bed for a day's rest. But both her husband and father complained loudly at her absence, and she did not enjoy it as she was worrying about the children.

Then Herselin heard from a relation that his elder brother of ninety was ill, lonely and downcast, and insisted that he should be invited to live with them in the house to cheer his old age. Christiana thought it was a delightful plan, but really there was no room to spare. Herselin replied that Adriaen could go. The old came first, and after all it was his own house. He had graciously allowed the du Ponts to live in it all this time, and he had never complained when their friends had come to stay—looking meaningfully at Adriaen. Du Pont said that the old brother was a slobbering idiot, practically blind, and that his wife had quite enough work already. Herselin burst into tears and sobbed that his family had never been so insulted. Du Pont flung out of the room. Christiana threw her arms around Herselin's neck, and told him that he was a

saint to have let them live with him so long, but that it would be a little difficult to care properly for him and his terrible rheumatism, as well as his dear old brother, who really did not see quite so well as he used. She then obligingly spiked her plump cheek on his prickly beard, and appealed to Adriaen with grey, tearful eyes. Adriaen decided the matter by promising to paint Herselin's portrait the very moment he had finished his present commissions. Christiana dried her father's eyes, and he hobbled up to his room contented.

In the spring Adriaen had time to visit Rubens more often. Rubens appeared to be ageing. His features, becoming sharper, had acquired an even greater distinction. There was still a healthy colour in his face, though a hint or two of blotchiness. The youthful waviness of his hair had gone. There was more grey in his beard and he wore it shorter, for it was patchy. Troubles and physical pain had creased his skin, and though his eyes were still fiery, Adriaen feared that the furnaces of his tremendous energy were dying down. He still lived a full life, though at a less exhausting pace. He had resigned his diplomatic activities, giving himself more time for relaxation with his possessions, his children, his wife, his animals, and his garden.

Adriaen found him one day pacing up and down a path, followed by a greyhound, rubbing his hands with delight. The Archduke Ferdinand had just honoured him with a visit, expressed himself graciously pleased with all he saw, confirmed him in his offices, and commissioned a series of pictures.

‘The approval of princes means much to you, Peter Paul.’

‘Not more than to other men,’ Rubens answered

defensively. ‘And I wouldn’t allow any one else to make such a remark to me.’

‘No, I don’t suppose you would!’

Rubens laughed suddenly and surprisingly.

‘You are an impertinent and worthless young devil—but I like you. I’m getting old now—and my “domestic enemy” becomes worse and worse. I want to cram all the paint I can on to canvas while I’m still able to hold a brush. The archduke’s career will suit me as a subject—full of battle and action.’

‘Tell me, Peter Paul, for it interests me profoundly, why is your life so temperate and your art so unrestrained?’

‘I’ve worshipped force all my life, Adriaen. Force and the power to handle it. Power, yes. I was not high-born, yet I’ve always known myself a greater man than most, and it is not easy for the low-born to climb high if they are scrupulous. . . .’

Just then a footman came to announce the picture-buyer to King Charles I of England. Adriaen burst out laughing and clapped his hands. Rubens frowned at him and hastened into the house.

Force, Adriaen thought, and power. Huge forces are boiling continually within Peter Paul, yet he desires power, for he is only a bourgeois and he wants to climb high. So he must restrain his fiery spirit, and he binds himself, perhaps unconsciously, with chains of pagan moderation; with chains of religion, forcing on himself the uncongenial belief that he is only a humble follower of Christ; chains of social respectability, mixing chiefly with his own class, so that he may not have to endure snubs; of possessions of every description, so that he may have around him the symbols of his power. But he can’t be content to restrain himself.

He must restrain others—at the same time, mark you, getting a satisfactory sense of his own power. He must rule his household, his pupils, the workers in his picture factory like a little monarch—a kindly, courteous monarch, yet a monarch. He must try to put an end to the war—war, blood, violence, cruelty—all things which he really loves, types of force. But he is secretly afraid of his own force, so he is afraid of other people's. And it all comes out in his paintings—all this violence, lust, and cruelty. There is nothing to restrain him there. When he takes brush in hand the lid of the kettle is forced up, and the waters of his surging spirit boil over. Then he marries a wife young enough to be at least his daughter. He is kindness itself to her, but, by God, I pity the poor woman! Lately he has put aside many of his worldly activities, and the result has been an immense flare-up of the forces within him. He is getting old, too, he is racked by gout, his energy is burning lower—he has not much time left. Perhaps he is approaching a second boyhood. He has proved himself the better man to the world at large. Now he can let himself go. He does so, on canvas, with wild and lovely creatures, half-animal, half-god. Let us be thankful that he was not born a Spanish prince and sent to command in the Netherlands! . . .

IV

Adriaen painted Christiana as the Madonna, in her best bottle-green dress, with Gabrielle standing on the arm of the chair beside her, against the open, mullioned window and the roofs of Antwerp beyond—all very conventional, rather difficult, and curiously uninspiring.

Christiana could not give him much time, and Gabrielle was soon tired, so that Isabella often had to take her place. Adriaen would try to think of stories to tell the children as he painted, but, unlike Rubens, he found it difficult to do two forms of creative work at once, and after some minutes Isabella would usually say: 'I don't like this stor-stor-story, Adriaen.' Christiana was very interested in the picture, and would look at it closely when the sitting was over. 'It's going to be very good,' she always said.

But Adriaen was far from satisfied. It was not going to be good. It was going to be rather bad. It was flat and lifeless. Yet Hals would have made a lovely thing of it—dashed it off in a few hours, snorting through his nostrils, frowning, biting his lower lip, swearing under his breath—a great, skilful bear! Why was his own effort so dead-alive? He had painted few portraits as such? True. It was not his usual subject? True. It purported to be a straightforward religious picture, with no characteristic touches of humour or mockery? True. He was failing to give adequate expression to Christiana's subtle attractions, which he had only unconsciously noticed before, hidden as they were under the bustling protectiveness of her everyday self—her soft skin, the wisdom of her grey eyes, which were unexpectedly sad in repose, the firm curves of her bosom, the small perfection of her feet? True again. Nevertheless, there was some other reason for his failure and he could not grasp it. It was maddening because he intensely wanted the picture to be a success, so that he could give it to Christiana, partly as some small return for her hospitality, partly because of the delight of giving her something for which she would really care, and partly because she was so

charmingly flattered that he was painting it. But he could not bring it to life, and instead of enjoying the work, it irritated him.

Du Pont pretended an interest—a poor actor, Paul—and was very critical, though almost remorsefully encouraging when Adriaen invariably acknowledged the truth of his criticisms. He did not relish the painting of his wife by a comparative stranger, between both of whom there was clearly an affectionate understanding—perhaps his conscience goaded him for never having thought of drawing her himself. Jannetje thought it was lovely, but grudged the waste of time. Herselin was aggrieved that the picture had been begun before his own.

One afternoon Adriaen was gloomily painting in a minute design in gold round the neck of Christiana's dress. He thought: I ought to have painted them in the nude. But Christiana would have hated it, and she's probably got an ugly body. They usually have, though Cornelia's was lovely. I wonder if Christiana's is? I can't believe that it's ugly. The essentials—the earth, the human body—all beauty is from them. Women are utterly right to care for and display their bodies. These grim Calvinists! Women are the living links—yet they have always been kept in subjection. They are potentially far better creatures than us, that is why we keep them under. Christiana and du Pont. He wants a mother, a housekeeper, and a mistress all in one. Peter Paul and Hélène. He wants a mistress, a housekeeper, a model, and children to add to his collection of beautiful possessions. We men want to be protected against the brutality of this warfare of a life, which we consider ourselves alone suited to wage. But man is essentially a lonely creature—he takes women

to him as a protection against this loneliness. . . . What thoughts for Adriaen Brouwer! Christiana's influence?

Adriaen and Christiana? . . . Surely not? No. No. Her incessant mothering would eventually drive me mad, and her grey eyes would be sad at my irritation, which she would certainly discover, however well I acted. Yet she is the nearest to perfection in womanhood that I have known. And I can't paint her. The little Gabrielle and Isabella portrait isn't so bad. But the Madonna!—no, perfection in womanhood is not for me. . . . Fifteen devils! Do I love Christiana?—and loving her in the flesh cannot love her on canvas? . . . God's mercy, that would be really funny!

He took his palette-knife and, clenching his teeth, ripped the picture into ribbons. Then he sighed with relief and flung it out of the window into the yard, where it was found later by Isabella and Gabrielle, who brought it in tears to their mother, who brought it in tears to Adriaen.

'Oh, Adriaen, why, why have you done this?'

'It was a failure. You and I both know it was a failure. And you don't deserve a failure, Christiana.'

'But all the time and effort and care you have put into it, Adriaen! Oh, I can't bear to think of it all wasted!'

'Nonsense, dear Christiana! I've destroyed scores of pictures before now—mostly because dealers offered me absurd prices, it is true. I couldn't do this—it's not my subject. Believe me, I'm as sorry as you that I've failed.'

'But you're so impulsive, Adriaen! It's the waste, I hate! Not only of this picture, but of you. You're so young, so gifted, so handsome, so beloved—and look at you! Unkempt and debauched!'

Adriaen laughed. She was almost in tears.

'Oh, you 're so proud—so proud that you despise all the things which most of us consider important. You will give anything, but not the real Adriaen. At your core you are as hard and haughty as—as any Spaniard. You could have been almost as great as Rubens, and look at you!'

'I am much happier as I am.'

'I dare say, Adriaen, but you 've no right to be. All those who love you, all the world demands that you should be your best. Oh, Adriaen, I 'd felt that you 'd been a little better while with us, but I don't believe you have, after all. It 's—it 's disappointing. . . .'

She hung her head and tears ran down her cheeks. She made clumsy attempts to wipe them away with the back of her hand, looking just like Isabella or Gabrielle after a scolding. Adriaen was smiling as he took her in his arms and absently began to wipe her tears with an old paint rag.

'Dearest little Christiana, don't weep because of me. I 'm not worth it. But——'

'What *are* you scrubbing my face with? That filthy rag! How dare you! Now I 'm in a horrid mess!'

She hastened to the mirror, and they both began to laugh. Her smeared cheeks looked as if they were badly bruised.

'Oh, Adriaen! You are a devil! I shall never get it off. First you make me cry, and then you make me dirty like yourself, and then you make me laugh.'

'I should keep on laughing if I were you. Amusing others is the only justification for my life. "He made us laugh" will, I hope, be my epitaph—if I ever have such a thing as a tombstone.'

'Oh, don't be so absurd!' Christiana was half

sobbing, half laughing. ‘Now I must go and wash my face and get back to my work. Whatever would Paul think?’

‘Something very stupid, no doubt.’

‘I won’t hear a word against my Paul!’

‘Then he’s undeservedly lucky. . . . Come here at once and show that you forgive me for murdering your portrait.’

‘Certainly not!’

She made a bolt for the door, but Adriaen caught her, swung her round, and gave her a smacking kiss on each cheek.

‘You’re a darling, Christiana!’

‘You’re a beast!’

He tried to kiss her again, but she wriggled out of his arms. He shut the door behind her and sat down by the window.

He must go. He must leave Christiana soon, or he would never do so. He felt restless. The abortive picture had been the measure of his domestic captivity, and he had rightly destroyed it. Christiana’s sweet childlikeness and the plump cosiness of her in his arms were a warning. Anything more than affectionate friendliness would worry her and be binding on him. His delicious bonds would slowly become irritating and that would hurt her. He must return to his independence.

A knock on the door. Herselin.

‘I hear you have destroyed the portrait of my daughter. Very reprehensible! Now perhaps you will at last begin on mine?’

‘Certainly, Mijnheer. How would you like it done?’

‘Sblood, he would mercilessly caricature this old fool!

V

The next day he went to Christiana. She was baking, sleeves rolled up, pink plump arms covered with flour. She smiled at him.

'Christiana, I've been sent for to the fortress. I shall be back very late to-night.'

Her eyes clouded.

'I understand, Adriaen. I suppose it's no use asking you to come back early?'

'Not much, I'm afraid.'

She sighed.

He kissed her cheek lightly, and went out. It was cruel of him. She would worry, and probably sit up for him. But it had to be done.

• • • •

Towards dawn next morning Adriaen staggered down the Everdijkstraat, singing at the top of his voice and falling down every twenty yards. There he sat, swearing loudly for a few minutes. Then he picked himself slowly up, stood swaying, and made another short rush, until the ground came up and knocked him over again.

Light streamed out from beneath the du Ponts' door. Adriaen leaned his aching head against it and tried the handle. The door opened on him and he fell in. He lay there for a moment, eyes shut, everything whirling round. He opened his eyes to see Christiana sitting beside a guttering candle, blinking sleepily at him.

'Scuse me,' he muttered, 'but do I live here?'

All that day he slept, or pretended to sleep whenever any one came near him. At night, when the house was quiet, he made a bundle of his painting things, and

left a picture which he had just finished, with a note for Christiana, in the middle of the floor.

. . . After what has happened I can't stay any longer. What you saw last night—or was it the night before last?—was the real Adriaen. An unreal one has been with you all this time. And I think you'd hate the real one. At any rate, he'd hurt you and he'd hate to do that, so he is going, full of gratitude for your hospitality, but even more for showing him that women are worthy of respect. This picture may be worth some money—or it may serve to remind you of the poor lousy painter.—AB.

Then he crept downstairs and out of the house. It was sad to leave Christiana, sadder still to hurt her, but unless he disgusted her, she would not willingly have let him go, nor, probably, have let him alone once he had gone. Also she now had an excellent reason to give to the curious for his departure, and one which would reflect credit on her. But he hated going.

He lay miserably in a disused boat on the harbour beach that night, and the next day called on Peter Paul to tell him that he had gone back to his old attic, and to ask if he could do any work for him.

Rubens laughed as he slashed at his canvas.

'Well, they've endured you for a long time.'

'Yes. She's a fine woman that, but I couldn't stand the respectable security any longer.'

'Why, I thought you were a woman-hater?'

'So did I.'

CHAPTER XVI

DEATH OF A PAINTER

I

ADRIAEN was soon happy in his attic among the roofs. It was delightful to watch once again the sunlight striking flashes from the thousand tips of water in the harbour, the cavalcades of cloud careering across the sky, the gulls swooping and screeching in pointless ecstasy, the continuous comedy of the street below. Painting, watching, smoking, drinking, visiting Peter Paul for contrast, trying to find words for the swarm of ideas that would not go on to canvas, seeing the dust and dirt accumulate in his room, chuckling over memories, he wondered that he had remained so long in the drugging, busy, pettiness of the du Pont household. Later on he would go and see Christiana and the children. They would be charming for a few hours—but he must not stay longer.

So he was astonished one afternoon when there was a knock and Christiana walked in. She looked flustered and frightened, and at once went over to the window and peered down.

‘Christiana! This is good to see you. But what would your dear Paul say?’

‘I know. It’s a risk.’ Her voice was quavering.

‘Well—let me see your pretty face—don’t keep poking it out of the window. Sit down. I’ve only this one stool.’

'But where will you sit ?'

'On the floor. I generally do. A lowly position for a lowly fellow.'

She sat down and looked round the room, her nose wrinkling in disgust. Adriaen laughed.

'I know you 're itching to be at it. But if you raise a hand I 'll turn you out! I prefer it like this.'

'Oh, why must you live in this filthy pigsty ?'

'Because I am a pig.'

'Won't you come back to us ?'

'Your home is no place for pigs.'

'I 've come, at some risk, to ask you to return.'

'It was senseless, Christiana! But how did you find out where I lived ?'

'Sir Peter Rubens.'

'Risky, again ?'

'Perhaps. . . . But what a courteous and magnificent man! What a lovely house!'

'No lovelier than yours.'

'Don't be silly. . . . Won't you, Adriaen ?'

'Won't I what ?'

'Come back. The children ask every day for you.'

'Where 's A-A-Adriaen ?' he imitated, and she smiled.

'Besides, Paul doesn't want me, nor your father. Paul only liked having me there to show off when people came. Your father wanted his portrait done. And Jannetje will be thankful to be rid of such an untidy person.'

'But, Adriaen—there are cases of plague down by the harbour!'

'Are there ? How 'd you know ?'

'Every one knows. It 's broken out again. Down here, in these streets, perhaps. Rubens warned me not to come. The weather 's coldish now, but when

it grows hotter the plague will spread. Adriaen, you may catch it here. Unhealthy as you are, it 'll kill you in a few hours. If you came to us, where it 's clean and higher up, you 'd be safer. I could look after you. But down here you won 't have a chance, if it spreads.'

'You 've run that risk—apart from others—in coming to see me.'

'A very small one. Oh, Adriaen, think of the plague—a terrible death!'

'If I catch it, I catch it. If I die, no one will be the worse. I don't mind dying, Christiana. A sudden black sleep, or centuries of expiation of my sins in hell, or a senseless impersonal radiance. It 's all one to me.'

'But you must think of your friends.'

'My friends? They 'll shrug their shoulders, and say: "A wasted life; a suitable death"—and go about their business. In a week I shall be forgotten for ever.'

'Oh, Adriaen, no, no, no!'

Her fingers interlaced, she was rubbing the palms of her hands spasmodically together. Her unhappy grey eyes never left him. He wanted to kiss them. He felt that he must be brutally firm for every one's sake.

'I 'm not coming back to you, Christiana—though it is kind of you. I 'm bored with your household—bored with good behaviour. I want to live in my own physical and moral pigsty. I don't want to be looked after and mothered. I 'm not a Paul. If I did want a mother or wife, I 'd try for someone like you. But I deserted my mother when young, and I 've never wanted another since. So please go away, and leave me to wallow contentedly.'

'Adriaen, you are cruel! You don't think of others. I do want you back so!'

'Christiana—I hope you aren't telling me that you're in love with me?'

She looked down for the first time, and Adriaen was again reminded of a child in distress. What a fresh, adoring, cosy little mistress she would be!

'Answer, Christiana.'

'I don't know. I haven't thought of it like that. Perhaps I am in love, or why have I been such a fool as to come all this way for nothing? I love Paul—but I feel quite differently towards him. Perhaps I am in love.'

She looked up at him, and he knew that she was. She could come here sometimes, he thought. He would go up to the Everdijkstraat when du Pont was away at work. . . .

'I don't think I'd better see you again, Christiana.'

'Oh!'

Her eyes filled with tears, and she looked away from him, out of the window, at a flock of pigeons whirring indifferently above the roofs. And she knew that she loved him.

'I couldn't ever leave the children,' she said presently, in a low voice that he had never heard before. 'And I don't know what Paul would do without me.'

'He won't ever have to do without you,' Adriaen answered gently. . . . Oh, go, go, go! he said to himself—this is hurting!

She sat very still, looking sideways out of the window. The curving lines of her neck were lovely. Fool, she was, to come here and realize that she loved him, and upset her happy security! Fool, he had been, to stay with them long enough for this to be possible! God's

love, if she sat there much longer with her sad, sweet, childlike dignity, he 'd—anything might happen!

He spat ostentatiously, struggled up clumsily, blasphemed, fetched crayon and paper, and sat down again, cross-legged.

'Stay like that, woman! It 's a lovely position you 're in. I must draw it. It 's just what I want for my new——'

'Oh!'

She sprang up and rushed out, her face burning.

He sat still for a moment, then flung the crayon and paper out of the window, and stretched himself out flat on the floor.

.

Du Pont was angrily waiting for Christiana when she came in, all ready for a scene.

'Where have you been this long time?'

'Out, out!'

'Not really! D'you mean to tell me that! Where?'

'Oh, for a walk.'

Christiana dragged wearily up to her room without looking at him. No good telling him the truth. No good hurting both of them. Du Pont hesitated, then followed her. She looked so tired. His outraged husband wrath, so carefully cherished during his anxious wait, had already begun to evaporate. It was unfair to nag at her when she looked so tired and unhappy.

'A long walk! You might have told me you were going, then I shouldn't have been so worried. It 's so unlike you. Several times I 've been on the point of going after you, but I didn't know which way. Jan-netje 's already put the children to bed—she wouldn't let me help.'

Christiana sat in a chair by her window, and looked out once more at a flock of whirring, indifferent pigeons.

'You 're so tired, my Christiana. What is it? Tell your Paul!'

Oh, if only he would leave her alone! But she must play her part, not let him suspect that he could never again be her Paul, that is, not in the same contented, peaceful way. Because Adriaen had wounded her, changed her unalterably, there was no reason why Paul should not continue to plod his placid, accustomed path.

'I—I suddenly wanted exercise, Paul. I lost my way a little—I go out so seldom. I 'm dead tired. D' you think you could let me rest for a while, my dear?'

But he could not leave it alone yet. He had to nag her with what had been nagging at him all the time. He too gazed out of the window, and muttered rather sheepishly:

'I believe you 've been to see that fellow Brouwer.'

She was smiling when he looked at her.

'Believe what you like, my Paul.'

She held out her hand to him. After a moment he took it and kissed it. Then he went quietly out. Yes, his suspicions were unworthy of him—and her. He hesitated on the stairs—should he go back and ask her forgiveness? No. She wanted to rest. It would be kinder to leave her alone. Yet she must think him a brute. Perhaps she was really hurt. You could never tell with her. How could he have made such accusations? He was jealous—jealous of Brouwer's superior charm, his skill as an artist, and of Christiana's obvious fondness for him. How Christiana must despise him—for she would know he was jealous, of course! And her good opinion meant so much.

He tiptoed up the stairs again, knelt down, and peeped through her keyhole. She was still sitting just as he had left her, staring through the window. He waited there some little time, but she did not move.

II

That summer Adriaen's pictures were in great demand. Life was not very pleasant with the Spaniards, the war, trade bad, and a serious threat of plague. People liked to look at something humorous—something which made them laugh outright the first time, and afterwards tickled and stirred them with some of the inward excitement of the richly comic Brouwer characters, caught so skilfully at the climax of a situation. His art had deepened under the influence of Rubens. He painted larger pictures with a more sweeping brush, his subtle colours subordinated now to a greyish tone against a thin, fluid, indefinite background, and with a delight in detail. His rare landscapes, too, the results of occasional walks outside the city, were eagerly bought—delicate impressions of light and air: low sand-hills, bushes or stunted trees by the roadside; a hut on the dunes, with an immense distance of sea and sky smeared with approaching thunder. Money flowed into his pockets and out again into those of his creditors, his friends, and the tavern-keepers. So much so that he had to borrow from Van der Bosch to buy himself a suit of clothes in which to attend the wedding of Anna, Rubens's ward and Jan Breughel's daughter, to his friend David Teniers.

Rubens gave a magnificent wedding-feast for the

Teniers at the Château of Steen, his newly purchased estate in the country—park-lands, farm-lands, hunting-lands, gardens, courtyards, out-houses, mansion. As once before Adriaen bought the very best material for his clothes, and painted it with small, exquisite caricatures of Rubens's work, Teniers's, and his own. A select company of Rubens's circle attended the feast, which was held out of doors before the château, on a carpet of lawn stretching down to an artificial lake, which was surrounded by trees, and filled with water-lilies, dark green water, goldfish, and large, sleepy carp. An orchestra, hidden in the trees, played to them. The food and wines were perfect, and every one had as much as they wanted and not too much. It was a typical Rubens occasion, Adriaen felt, and the sort of thing that Dirk Hals painted rather well. So typically restrained was it, that, after they had risen from the table, and Anna was surrounded by prattling females, Teniers and Adriaen instinctively caught each other's eye.

'My wife is enjoying a fine chatter,' said Teniers.
'Jesu! What offal these women talk!'

'And they're either envious of her if unmarried, or disillusioned if married. But it is Anna's supreme moment!'

'Have you had enough?'

'To eat, yes.'

'And to drink? . . .

Teniers summoned a lackey, who returned with a bottle of brandy. They seated themselves at the table. The sun poured down upon them. Splashes of vivid colour moved about under the shade. They laughed continuously. Soon there was only a drop left at the bottom of the bottle.

'Anna must drink this!' said Teniers thickly.

'Anna! Anna!' Adriaen shouted.

She came unwillingly.

'Yes?'

'Your husband wants you.'

'But I'm busy. Let him go on with his drinking—the sozzler!'

'Is that the way to answer your husband? Come at once!'

Adriaen emptied the bottle into a third glass. Anna and Teniers drank to the success of their married life.

'It looks like starting well,' Anna grumbled.

'It does,' Adriaen said. 'Intoxication is the only sane state in which to start marriage. You go on as you have begun, my lad!'

He aimed to slap Teniers on the back, but missed and knocked his hat off.

'Hoi! You're drunk, Adriaen! Disgusting!'

'Your husband'—Adriaen addressed Anna, swaying, glass in hand—'your husband is a fine painter—he copied me—and a drunkard. Your father is a fine painter—and a drunkard. Your grandfather—was he? —was the finest painter of them all, and finer than any one except Peter Paul—and he must have been a drunkard, because he painted so well. Hup! Beg pardon! Drink is the handmaid of art.'

'I hate drunkards!'

'So do I. Lousy fellows! Now, listen. I'm going to give you two some sound advice on marriage. Each live your own life, and lie like the devil. Have a good quarrel once a month, don't see too much of each other, and flog her once a week, David. Take as an example the habits of fish. They swim about in solitary—'

Van der Bosch came up and interrupted him.
‘The ladies over there request your presence,
Adriaen.’

‘Hup!—beg pardon!’

‘The ladies over there——’

‘Yes—I heard you.’

‘You ’re drunk.’

‘Thank God!’

‘Beastly.’

‘Exquisite. Lend me ten thousand florins?’

Van der Bosch walked away.

‘Excuse me, Anna, I must leave you. Now, remember whatever it was I was saying about fish.’ Adriaen kissed her hand and wandered off, forgetting after a yard or so where he was supposed to be going. He found Rubens sitting under an ilex tree by the lake. A heavy chestnut lowered its boughs to within a foot of the water. More chestnuts were massed beyond. A little pavilion stood at the far end, reflectionless, for the water-lilies were thick right up to the edge.

‘You ’re drunk at my feast!’ Rubens snapped, with his fixed gouty smile.

‘Yes, thank God—and you!’

‘You know I hate excess.’

‘Peter Paul! You lie! You love it—on canvas.’

‘I go mad on canvas.’

‘No—you go sane. You *are* Peter Paul then. And the world worships, and the result is this abundance.’ Adriaen waved his arm, just missing Rubens.

‘Be careful! My gout is bad to-day.’

‘I ’m sorry. But, Peter Paul, I don’t want you to be a hyp—hup!—hyp—this is going to be difficult. A—a—hypocrite! . . . Got it! I ’m a drunken failure in life, you ’re a drunken success in art. We ’re both

what the world calls mad in different ways. That's why we're such good friends. We're both on a pinnacle above the rest of the herd. They shrug their shoulders at me and clap their hands at you. There are about four people I respect in this world, Peter Paul. Christiana du Pont is one, you're another. She loves me, and I love you, and I'm not going to let you be a hup!—o—crite.'

'Excuse me, master.'

Adriaen turned round.

'Dear old Van der Bosch! How are you? Lend me a million florins?'

Van der Bosch smiled, a pained skeleton smile.

'The ladies called you to come to them, Adriaen, but you refused, so they are coming to you.'

'Sblood! I forgot.'

Half a dozen ladies approached, tittering. Hélène tittered the foremost. Adrian stood up.

'How marvellously you dress your wife, Peter Paul!' he murmured.

'We think your clothes are so beautiful, too, Monsieur Brouwer. We long to know where you bought them.'

'Yes—yes!'

'Clothes? Clothes? Oh, these things! I painted them myself.'

'May we look?'

'Do. Hup!—Oh, mother of God! and I meant 'specially not to hiccup before the ladies. I did really, Van der Splosh, you old sinner!'

They crowded round, touching, fingering, pulling him in different directions, tittering, giving little coos of delight, calling each other's attention to detail, till Adriaen could bear it no longer.

'Fifteen devils! Stand away, all of you!'

They drew back, astonished.

'The last time I went to a wedding-feast I sacrificed my garments. Apparently I must do so again. Here they are, if you want them!' He pulled his dagger from his belt. 'Here, Hélène, here's one of your husband's nudes for you! . . . Mevrouw Van der Bosch, one of my masterpieces for you! . . . Another Rubens for you, you with the face like a calving cow! . . .' He hacked and tore, flinging the little exquisite pictures at the ladies' heads, who hovered, vacillating between their modesty, their surprise, their desire to possess, and their shrill disgust at such outrageous waste. Soon Adriaen stood in tattered shirt and hose.

Rubens towered beside him, eyes flaming, white face taut, hand trembling on stick. 'Away! Away from my house!'

'But, Peter Paul, they wanted——'

'I'll have you thrown into the lake!'

'I'll save you the trouble.'

Adriaen turned and took a running jump into the water. He came up with a fish in his hand.

'Give this to Anna with a kiss from me!' he shouted at Rubens and his gaping guests. Then he turned, floundering his way between water-lilies, sucking them under with his wash, like a clumsy sea-monster.

III

Summer lingered right on into autumn that year. The evenings were warm and light, and people went in boats and barges on the harbour and up the Scheldt, starting out noisily with drink and songs and chatter, returning under the moon, quiet, sentimental, or

fuddled. The trees were slow in changing to russet and gold. Swallows lingered. Men sat out till a late hour drinking in the streets. Day after day the sun rose brilliantly and set in calm splendour. The sea sparkled round the shipping, and light flowed sweetly across the roofs of the city. But death was working away quietly in airless alleys down by the harbour, encouraged by the warmth and the happy carelessness of the people.

Fishermen cleaning their tackle would be surprised to see a man run stark naked and yelling down the stone steps on to the beach pursued by weeping women, dodge between the rocks and across the difficult pebbles into the water, and wade further and further out, until only his head was visible. Then that too disappeared. They made no attempt to rescue him. They shrugged their shoulders and crossed themselves, and went on with their work. A man would leave his card-table, have his final drink, pay his reckoning, carefully count his change, say his good night, walk out into the street, fall down in a swoon, and presently crawl into a doorway to die. People would pass by on the other side with a muttered prayer, and the next morning the body would have gone. The quiet of the night would be suddenly torn with shrieks and sounds of running feet dying away.

Soon the roads leading out of the city were blocked by horsemen, carriages crammed with anxious people, and carts heaped with household goods, as the rich burghers and their families fled from the enemy. Ships and barges sailed, too, filled to overflowing. There was a continual smell of burning in the nostrils, for the physicians said it purified the air. Churches were crowded with the hysterically prayerful. Quacks cried

infallible charms and nostrums about the streets. The Spaniards locked themselves up inside their fortress. Shops were closed. Many were looted by the starving poor, and hideous punishments given to captured culprits. Notices were posted on trees giving advice as to precautions. Close relatives avoided one another in the streets. You never knew who might have the disease in their blood, unostentatiously devouring them. Rumours ran wildly round and round. Death became a commonplace.

Then the weather changed. First, cold winds and rain, then hard frost, under which death wilted. But suffering went on. Antwerp's thin trade had been upset by the panic. Food was scarcer than ever and wages hard to find. Half-starved men and women ate half-starved cats and dogs and rats and horses, possible bearers of the plague. When they could not get these they prowled the streets, so that the comparatively wealthy hardly dared go out of their houses, lest they should be knocked senseless, plundered, and their naked bodies fought over. The sides of the harbour were black with people trying to catch fish. Bodies again began to lie about the streets, dead from starvation—and these in their turn bred pestilence. But the rich, rejoicing prematurely in the abatement of the plague, disturbed the night with drunken celebrations, and maltreated fanatics who stalked about prophesying that God would again strike them down for their sins. Christmas was not a happy time.

The beginning of the new year was warm and muggy. The air circulated slowly and smelt evil. The black branches of the trees scarcely stirred. Dried leaves still lay on the ground, unswept. The waters of the harbour were opaque and oily. Death, nourished on

fetid air, leaped at victims weakened by cold and starvation. The daily processions from the town began again, the sudden shriekings and lamentations, the swoonings in the streets. Panic set in. People barricaded themselves in their houses and gave themselves up for lost.

It was Breda all over again, Adriaen thought. Antwerp was besieged by plague instead of Spaniards. His life went on as usual, except that he had difficulty in finding men to drink with. Most of his friends had disappeared. Rubens had removed to Steen at the first outbreak. And there was not much market for paintings.

He was horrified to receive a visit from Christiana. She looked distraught.

'Christiana, how dare you come into this part of the town! It's madness! You've got your family to think of, you——'

'Paul is dead.'

'Paul?—oh, no, no!'

'Adriaen, what am I going to do? What am I going to do?'

By the way her tears flowed it seemed as if she was letting go of herself for the first time. She would restrain herself, Adriaen thought, for every one's sake, cheerfully trying to keep everything in the usual secure routine. Oh, Christiana! . . . He went towards her, then stopped, in a sweat of uncertainty. Her sobbing died down and she looked up at him, weakly, played out. His heart turned to water. He had to screw up his eyes and bite and bite at his lips. He began to walk up and down, arms folded.

'When did he die, Christiana?'

'He's only lately buried.'

'Was it——?'

'No, no! He's been sickly all the winter. One of his chills. The great frost and terror of the plague finished him.'

'The children?'

'Well—God be praised!'

'God be praised!'

'Where am I to go, Adriaen?'

'Nowhere. Stay in your home. Your end of the town is comparatively free. Your father will help you.'

'He is gone.'

'Gone?'

'He fled to the country, to my uncle, as soon as Paul fell ill. He swore it was the plague.'

'Coward! . . . Jannetje?'

'She'll stay till the last of us dies.'

'Money?'

'There is enough.'

'I'll help you when I get any. It's hard to sell stuff now. I could borrow some.'

She smiled and shook her head.

'You owe enough already.'

'You could have told me all this by letter, Christiana.'

'I had to see you. I want you to marry me.'

'Marry?'

'If not marry me, then come to live with us and look after us.'

'But I can't even look after myself, you know that.'

'You'll be safer in our end of the town, Adriaen.'

'If I catch it, I catch it.'

'I can look after you, and the children love you. Come to us, Adriaen. We want you so!'

He picked up a brush and tugged at its bristles.

'No.'

'You won't?'

'No.'

'I'm so frightened for you—down here.'

'I'm not frightened. But I wish you'd go. Every moment away from your home increases the risk you yourself run.'

They stood in silence, looking at each other.

'You want me to go?'

'Yes.'

'Oh . . . oh, very well. Good-bye then, Adriaen.'

'Good-bye, Christiana.'

She hesitated, looking at him. He said again:
'Good-bye, Christiana.'

'Good-bye, Adriaen.'

She was gone. He leant out of the window. The street was deserted. He noticed grass coming up between the cobbles, and smoke belching out of a window further down. A gull wheeled above his head, screeching. Christiana came out from below and walked quickly away without looking up.

IV

Adriaen chuckled with pleasure as he looked at his canvas. He had seized the whole crafty, lecherous character of this vagabond in the act of winking his little eye and raising his perfectly painted glass to his lips. For once it was good, good, good! Now to suggest the unsavoury background of dingy tavern wall, with half-open door and fresh green woods showing through. He went to the window to mix his colours, for the light was beginning to fail. He felt a sudden spasm of pain run across behind his eyes, and, a moment later, retched out of the window.

He dropped his palette, and leant panting against the wall. Lucky I've had little to eat lately, he thought, or I should have vomited into the street. . . . Ouch! A devil has me by the entrails! Jesu! I wonder if . . .

He ripped off his ragged shirt. He searched in the dying light. Yes—there under his arm—two small knots of gangrened flesh, white and hard as horn. He poked them gingerly with his finger, his mind a blank, and a dagger stabbed at his side. He slid to the ground. . . .

Well, then! So he was to die? Black sleep, Spaniard's inquisition in hell, flaming white souls, just more and better painting? Which? He would know soon, or else not know at all. Did it matter? No. Would Adriaen Brouwer, poor lousy painter, go on? Did it matter? Not in the least. He'd seen some lovely things. He'd kept intact his principles of beauty, and never violated them with shoddy work or mean prices. He'd painted some pictures that amused people—perhaps they'd continue to do so in the future. He'd made folk laugh. He'd made Christiana weep—darling Christiana! He'd known a few interesting people—and a legion of fools—and they were all afraid. Every single one of them terrified of life, and more so of death. It had been a meaningless tangle of a life—like Jew Snortheim's garden—but on the whole very, very funny. He was ready to die. He'd been complete for years. Life could only bring further disillusionment. God be thanked that he'd been firm in his independence! His death would affect nobody. Perhaps Christiana would weep again. She would forget soon, and make another timid, respectable bourgeois the best of wives. . . . Please God, protect her from this plague! Ah, Jesu, may she not have

been infected by me! The sudden thought of the household in the Everdijkstraat prostrated with plague froze him. Had he the plague on him when she came the other day? Was she being tortured at this moment by the thought of her children's future agony, a far crueler torture for her than her own bodily pain? . . .

Time went on, and he found himself shivering violently. The dagger plunged itself into his side, hoicked itself out, plunged itself in. . . . So death is going to be hard? he thought vaguely. They do well to be frightened of death, do they? Well, I'm going to die just as I've lived. Priest? What sort of a priest? I'm not like my father. Priests mean witchcraft, Spaniards, and torture. I've got the torture, thanks. I don't want priests. I've lived without 'em, and I'll die without 'em. I wonder if Peter Paul's gout hurts him as much as these cursed tumours? But I'm not going to suffer unnecessarily, thank you, you swines of Spaniards! . . .

He staggered up on to his feet and stood swaying against the window. Night had fallen over the roofs. The reflection of a yellow light sprawled in the harbour. His eye caught his painting. Oh, curse it, he thought, I shan't be able to finish that, one of the best things I've done! Just my luck! Well, what does it matter? . . . The daggers began to stab furiously. He groaned, staggered to the door, then staggered back for palette and brush. Leaning against the door he scrawled a great black 'P' across it, shut it behind him, locked it, and put the key in his pocket. Then he dropped palette and brush and slithered down the stairs.

Eventually he reached the street. No one about. He tottered off, leaning against the wall, a Spaniard behind with a sword, continually jabbing him. He

stroved to keep his mind clear. He must shout a warning to any one he met. To find his way there was second nature. But he must warn people. The street whirled before his eyes. It was like being drunk or drugged, only not quite so pleasant. Ha, ha! Not quite so pleasant! He was about to die, so he oughtn't to laugh. Ha, ha! God's love! he'd laugh! He'd die laughing—only this vile hog of a Spaniard behind hurt him so. But he must keep his head to warn people, to warn people—and what did the end matter? Look at Jabbeke, look at Bladelin, look at Brouwer! Feeble ends, feeble ends! Terrible days, terrible days! God, if you give Christiana and the children the plague, I'll——

Ah, here! So far so good. Deserted. No light in the window. He fumbled for the door and banged on it, banged and banged till he dropped, and the Spaniard stood over his body, piercing, twisting, piercing, twisting, so that he rolled away into the gutter in his agony.

The door opened. A head.

'Who's there?'

Adriaen concentrated himself fiercely.

'Put—brandy—on—doorstep.'

'Who's there?'

'Brandy—on—doorstep—or I'll come in—plague.'

'I daren't.'

'Brouwer — Adriaen Brouwer — you know — lousy painter—valuable picture in my—attic.'

The door closed. So he must endure the Spaniard until the end! God—send—end! He lay there writhing. But after a hundred years the door opened and a bottle was put out at arm's length into the street. Then the door banged.

'Ha, ha! Swine Spaniard, I'll cheat you!'

He concentrated. He rolled nearer the door. He stretched out a hand, grasped the bottle, pulled it to him, spilling the brandy all over his face and bare breast, pouring it into his open mouth, coughing, spluttering, retching it up. But some of it went down, warm, burning, delicious, making him break into sudden sweat. He lay there gasping for a moment, in exquisite abandonment.

Then the Spaniard was at him again. He drank and drank, spilling most of it in his eagerness, trying to keep pace with the Spaniard's sword, which had been pushed right inside him now. Then it had become a white rose of fire, smouldering and glowing, bursting every few moments into tongues of flame which penetrated to every corner of his body. When he opened his eyes to see the bottle neck, a skyful of constellations was wheeling above him. Then they joined together to become angels, with hair of flame and wings of blinding azure. But then one had a gigantic, glowing ram's nose and another was dirty, drugged, and unshaven. Ha, ha! Great God, how funny! And his gigantic laughter echoed drunkenly all over the heavens, winding in and out of the blazing angels and wheeling constellations.

The white rose of fire was a piercing lily now—straight, sharp, and taut. He was the earth, whence sprang all loveliness, and the lily of his loins was pushing its way upwards to the sun. Then he was the lily, straight, sharp, and taut, piercing upwards through the dark earth which throbbed all round him with steady, implacable rhythm. Pain was turned to ecstasy, and there was unutterable satisfaction in this agonizing rhythm of the fiery earth, which hemmed him in and

through which he had to pierce . . . to push . . . to pierce . . . to push. . . .

Suddenly, with the voice of thunder, fire leapt down from the sun to greet the lily, and there was a great shout of laughter among the stars. Then he was part of the great dazzling shout of laughter, and there were familiar presences—laughing . . . laughing. . . .

V

They brought the news to Christiana du Pont that Adriaen Brouwer had died of the plague in a gutter outside a tavern, clutching a brandy bottle, for which he hadn't paid, to his naked, plague-marked breast. She shut herself in her room in an agony of weeping, and the children played listlessly in the little apple orchard.

The news reached Peter Paul Rubens at his Château of Steen. His smile came, hard and fixed, and tears stood in his eyes.

'And the last time I saw him I was angry with him! What a variety of possibilities there were in him! He had a small world of painting which he did exquisitely. Otherwise, he just stuck out his tongue at life. . . .

He ordered his household into mourning. After all, black suited her skin, Hélène reflected.

David Teniers heard, the Brants and the Fourments, and Van der Bosch. They shook their heads sadly, remarked that he was a brilliant painter and buffoon, and wondered how they would get back the money which he owed them.

Weeks later the news reached Van Zomeren, who wept maudlin tears; Van Ostade, who prayed for

Adriaen's soul; Lysbeth Hals and Judith Leyster, who cried a little, and Frans Hals, who said he knew that he would come to a bad end and went off to his tavern, wishing that Adriaen was with him. Cornelia never heard at all.

Christiana persuaded the Carmelites to bury him for eighteen stivers to save his body from the plague-pit.

Later, when the plague had died down, his many friends and the art-lovers of Antwerp arranged for his body to be dug up, coffined, and given an elaborate funeral in the Church of the Carmelites. Thousands followed his bier—wealthy, distinguished, intellectual, bourgeois, and poor. But mostly poor. Perhaps Adriaen was in the midst of the crowd, laughing . . . laughing. . . .

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